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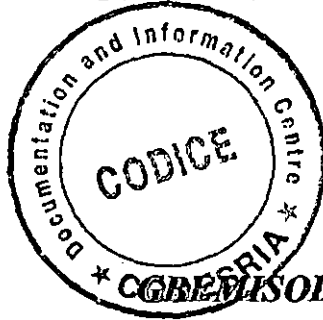
**Aesthetics of democratisation in
modern Nigerian drama**

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**AESTHETICS OF DEMOCRATISATION IN
MODERN NIGERIAN DRAMA**



BY

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN

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**AESTHETICS OF DEMOCRATISATION IN
MODERN NIGERIAN DRAMA**

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A P P R E C I A T I O N

The list appears long and inexhaustible. But I will within the limits of this space, express my sincere appreciation to everyone who has assisted in one way or the other toward the completion of the study.

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Gbemisola 'Remi Adeoti

I b a d a n

Ist June, 2001.

D E D I C A T I O N

This work is dedicated to my parents

Agbonyin Alamu

&

Adeyoola Asake

AND

To the fond memory of

Professor Ola Rotimi;

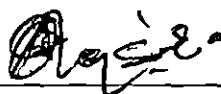
The Dramatist who left for the Backstage

On the 18th of August, 2000.

C E R T I F I C A T I O N

I certify that Mr. **Gbemisola Aderemi ADEOTI** carried out this work

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A B B R E V I A T I O N S

MH	<i>Midnight Hotel</i>
FZWL	<i>From Zia With Love</i>
YYDC	<i>Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest</i>
AT	<i>Awaiting Trouble</i>
TROW	<i>The Reign Of Wazobia</i>
TWR	<i>The Wives' Revolt</i>
NW	<i>Nwokedi</i>
TSG	<i>The Silent Gods</i>
HDR	<i>Human Development Report</i>

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A B S T R A C T

Since the pioneering efforts of Hubert Ogunde in the 1940s through the 1960s, the subject of politics has been a recurrent engagement of Nigerian drama and theatre. The present study observes that from 1980 to date, the focus has shifted from mere representation of general themes of politics to more specific notions of democratisation and good governance in Nigerian drama. The argument here is that the aesthetic modes of articulating democratisation in literary productions have not been adequately explored. Therefore, as an examination of modern Nigerian drama written in English, the thesis investigates how the genre has responded to Nigeria's quest for national development under democratic governance. Its central focus is the literary, rhetorical and performative techniques adopted by dramatists who choose democratisation as a theme in their plays within the last two decades of the twentieth century.

Taking cognisance of drama in terms of "text", "performance" and "context", the thesis examines representative works of first, second and third generations of Nigerian dramatists, using the genre critical approach. In order to provide insights into the socio-political under-currents that generate texts and also to establish the authorial democratic visions, a series of interviews with some playwrights were conducted. From the theatrical devices adopted in the works of these writers to project the notion of democratisation, four aesthetic constructs are identified. These are: the 'devaluation', the 'trado-epic', the 'gynocentric' and the 'heteroformic' constructs. Specifically, the thesis analyses eight plays

by seven dramatists using two plays each to exemplify the dynamic operation of the four identified constructs.

The first chapter surveys Nigerian drama and its responses to the imperative of democratic governance. Chapter Two attempts to come to terms with fundamental issues in the theory and criticism of Nigerian (African) drama. It also provides a background discourse on the genre perspective. Based on the identified aesthetic principles, Chapter Three examines the devaluation construct in Femi Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* and Wole Soyinka's *From Zia With Love*. Chapter Four explores the trado-epic aesthetics in Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* and Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju's *Awaiting Trouble*. The gender factor in democratisation is the focus of the gynocentric aesthetics, which is investigated in Chapter Five. Against this backdrop, Tess Onwueme's *The Reign Of Wazobia* and J.P.Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* are analysed. Some dramatists deliberately coalesce indices of the fore going aesthetic options in their works. The peculiar composite construct emerging from these interconnections forms the focus of Chapter Six. The Chapter studies the heteroformic aesthetic option adopted by playwrights like Esiaba Irobi and Ahmed Yerima in *Nwokedi* and *The Silent Gods* respectively.

In its conclusion in Chapter Seven, the thesis contends that modern Nigerian drama has taken a new direction as it reforms its techniques in exercising the notions of democratisation. It also submits that there is a growing body of drama written in English, which has contributed, and is contributing, to the notion and praxis of democratisation in contemporary Nigerian society.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria in its post-independence years has consistently remained a confounding theatre of political instability, economic deprivation and social dislocation. This state of functional disorder is firmly grounded in an authoritarian culture foisted on the nation in the First Republic and accentuated by prolonged military rule. Yet, to date, the country continues to grope in search of a stable democratic order dedicated to the pursuit of social justice, equity, human freedom and free participation in public affairs. As its singular merit, such a polity does not accommodate the forceful repression of communal will by a few and whimsical orchestration of sectarian interest by a tiny governing elite.¹

Since the final collapse of the first attempt at civil rule on January 15, 1966, about three decades of military rule has imposed on Nigeria, a 'unicentric' political reality. 'Unicentricism' is a monolithic socio-political arrangement built around a single, ultimate determining centre. This restrictive and alienating centre, whether as Supreme Military Council or Armed Forces Ruling Council or Provisional Ruling Council, lacks popular power base. It is therefore, compelled to struggle for legitimacy. However, it has strong capacities to impose its will on all by forceful promotion of its arbitrary authority in a way that is quite antithetical to the ethos of democracy. As attested by the *1998 Nigeria Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Nigeria's Achilles' heel remains political

instability and protracted military rule. "The military has now become a major source of instability in Nigeria's political development, and has frustrated the emergence of a mature political culture" (80).

Military interventions in politics have always been exculpated on the grounds of 'failed democracy'. This failure is indexed by the breach of law and order, upsurge of violence, threat to public security, corruption, mismanagement of public resources, collapse of social utilities, electoral manipulation and unemployment among other reasons. Nonetheless, abundant social indices have shown that authoritarian regimes, whether civilian or military, exacerbate rather than curb the above ills. In the case of post-independence Nigeria, the absence of a genuine and sustainable democracy has aggravated these societal ills. The austere economic policies of successive regimes have deepened poverty and constantly generated chaos and instability. There is no gainsaying that political instability is a major factor in the accentuation of poverty.

In spite of his apologia for the military, Sam Ukpabi admits this view in *Strands in Nigerian Military History* when he submits:

Although the military set out to restore law and order and to curb the endemic violence in various parts of the country, it nonetheless, by its own acts, legitimized the use of violence as an instrument for changing a government...by using force to topple the civilian government, the military made political conflicts more violent and set the pattern for the future (122).

According to the UNDP report earlier quoted, 48.5 percent of Nigeria's total population lives below poverty line. Two third (2/3) of this 48.5 percent or 37.2

million people, as at the end of 1997 lived in 'extreme' poverty. The situation, to date, has not been altered for the better, in spite of constant avowal of commitment to eradicating poverty by the government, through programmes like Better Life for Rural Women, People's Bank of Nigeria, Family Economic Advancement Programme, Poverty Alleviation Programme and Poverty Eradication Programme. There are clear indications of survival deprivation – deprivation in education and economic provisioning, low life expectancy, high infant mortality and low per capital income. The report candidly expresses the situation in its grimness:

The bitter reality of Nigerian situation is not just that the poverty situation is getting worse by the day but that more than four in ten Nigerians live in conditions of extreme poverty of less than N320 per capita per month, which barely provide for a quarter of the nutrition requirements for daily living (2).

The rising profile of oil as the hub of Nigerian economy from the 1970s has not translated into greater quality of life for most Nigerians². Rather, it has engendered fierce contests for state power and monopoly of accruing oil revenue among the ruling elite. In such contests as clearly dramatised by J.P. Clark in *The Wives' Revolt*, politics becomes a zero-sum exercise in which no method is spared including the foul and the violent. This position is reinforced by Ake (1994), Saro-Wiwa (1995) and Ninalowo (1997).

Beside the above indices of 'social anomy', ethnic and religious conflicts have continued unabated, apparently in defiance of the state's violent and repressive

solutions. The dictatorial power structure has allowed corruption to flourish on account of its lack of accountability and transparency in governance. Meanwhile, public institutions traditionally established to administer social justice and maintain law and order like the courts, police and prisons are largely compromised by partisanship, greed and corruption, thus, eroding people's confidence in them. Cases of human rights abuse are legion and have been documented in several media. These are usually in form of arbitrary arrest, detention without trial, torture in police custody, extra-judicial killings especially by security personnel, extortion of gratification and so on.³ Even though a transfer of power from the military to civilians had been accomplished since May 29, 1999, these abuses and deprivations have not been eliminated from the polity. Yet, it is axiomatic that human development is incomplete or outright impossible in the absence of essential ingredients of democracy like social justice and human freedom.

There exists a good measure of consensus among scholars, researchers and theorists of various disciplines on the portraits of post-independence Nigeria briefly sketched above. The most important historic challenge remains how the country will, after recovering from the adverse effects of military rule, launch itself on the path of genuine democracy and development. Nigerian writers and performing artistes, like political scientists and activists have joined the groundswell of opposition against dictatorship in which coercion rather than consensus is an instrument of governance. Modern Nigerian dramatists, from Wole Soyinka to Esiaba Irobi, from Femi Osofisan

to Ahmed Yerima, From Ola Rotimi to Tess Onwueme, have variously denounced authoritarian rule and its facilitators. They have used drama as a scourge of autocrats and as a means of canvassing for a democratic culture based on popular sovereignty, equity, equality, peaceful resolution of conflicts, respect for rule of law and tolerance of dissenting views. These are generally regarded as the most viable option for a country that is constantly threatened by political instability. It should be noted in passing that Nigeria tops the list of politically unstable countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with six violent and unconstitutional changes of government out of about 85 of such changes that had taken place in the continent since the decade of independence-1960s.

There is an increasing awareness of the substantial gap between the goals of democratisation being pursued in succeeding political dispensations and the brazen reality of recurrent authoritarianism in the country. Every botched democratisation project⁴ goes on to confirm that autocracy in any form is ill suited for national development. The disposition of the military to coercion as a means of securing legitimacy, its normative detestation of contrary view due to its command structure and its inability to widen the public space for people's participation in governance have exposed the institution as unsuitable for the tasks of democratisation and development. Nigerian drama is well attuned to this reality.

In spite of the demonstrable concerns of modern Nigerian playwrights with democracy, valid contributions and potentials of the aesthetics of drama constitute an

area of research that is yet to be adequately explored, judging from the scholarship of democracy and the criticism of drama and theatre. This perceived hiatus in scholarship is registered in three ways. The first is the common tendency to treat democracy exclusively as a political and economic concept and therefore, the primary concern of Social Scientists. The second evidence lies in the insufficient critical works on the demonstrable identification by modern Nigerian dramatists with the goals of democratisation. The third is the concentration of many a critic on thematic, sometimes to the extent of undermining or excluding theatrical and literary strategies adopted by playwrights in articulating their political concerns.

Consequently, the present study is an in-depth exploration and critical analyses of modern Nigerian drama with emphasis on 'how' the genre has responded to Nigeria's long quest for democratic governance. The broad objective is to enhance our knowledge of the dynamics of democracy and improve our understanding of the aesthetics of Nigerian drama. It is also to show theatre⁵ as a responsive and dialogic space through which the state and the citizenry can be re-orientated toward cultivating democratic ethos in Nigeria (Africa) against the backdrop of rapid global changes. The overarching theoretical interests of the thesis lie in the phenomenal reflectivity of art on the one hand and form of art as the primal purveyor of this reflectivity on the other. Thus, while recognising the intercourse between theatre and polity, the thesis investigates the principles, processes and components of this reflectivity through a generic analytic framework

Drama is arguably a framework of hermeneutics, through which the playwright orders and re-orders the 'chaos' of existence. A close scrutiny of form, dramatic conventions, style and structure can yield vital interpretive clues. These should not be ignored in generating insights into political engagements of literature. To probe the contours of material existence depicted in literature through literary forms and the method of representation is to amplify the range of signification in the enterprise of criticism. The generic theory adopted in the study is predicated on the investigation of form and literary constituents. Genre theory according to Stevens and Stewart in *A Guide to Literary Criticism and Research* attempts to "recognize common properties among works, to classify works and to interpret them in light of other texts of a similar kind" (11). Thus, paying attention to the internal logic and consistency of the text as dictated by genre theory, the thesis elucidates each of the chosen plays through their polemical and performative properties in their articulation of the democratic imperative. This approach deepens the audience's perception of the texts beyond what have been enunciated by earlier critical works. It however, tempers formal literary purity as demanded by the Aristotelian strand of genre theory. This point is clarified in the next chapter.

The choice of the decades of 1980 and 1990 as the primary focus of the thesis is quite significant. This is a period in Nigeria's socio-political history when the aspiration for good governance based on democratic principles is more fervently expressed in drama, as it is found in other socio-cultural discourse. Besides, the period

coincides with yet another fool's errand in democratic experiment in Nigeria (1979-1983) and the second full-blown military rule (31st December, 1983 – 29th May, 1999).

During the period, there emerge a crop of playwrights who, like Soyinka, Clark, Rotimi and Osofisan, are university trained. They hold university degrees in English Studies, Literary Arts and Theatre Arts and are working either with government-owned arts and culture institutions and mass media or the academia. Aside from the gamut of classical and modern theatrical forms of the West and the Orient to which they are exposed in the course of their education, they have the artistic forms explored by members of the first and second generation to draw from. This crop of playwrights or the third generation of playwrights include Pedro Obaseki, Ben Tomoloju, Stella Oyedepo, Ahmed Yerima, Esiaba Irobi, Rasaki Bakare, Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju, Tess Onwueme and Chinyere Okafor among others. Some of them have acknowledged the influence of pioneer writers in the shaping of their aesthetics. However, all these are in addition to the pre-colonial indigenous dramatic traditions that still endure in the cultural background of each playwright. They, like their predecessors, borrow from traditional theatrical elements in their artistic responses to the challenges of democratisation.

In the plays selected for close study, ethos of democracy or their absence become the mainspring of theatrical discourse and artistry. As Onwueme declares in an interview:

To me, democracy is not simply an option for

Nigeria, or indeed any nation in the world today, it is **the way, the only way** for freedom, justice, equity and progress in a civil society. To this extent, democracy is not an option but the choice for the Nigerian society to move forward, and join the team of the free, progressive global stage. (Appendix C)

In one instance, the plays propagate participatory, pluralistic and egalitarian ethos of democracy as obtained in Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*. In another related instance, they excoriate the will to narcissism upon which autocracy, tyranny, despotism and other antitheses of democracy are founded. This is demonstrated in Soyinka's *From Zia With Love*. On the whole, the audience is confronted not just with mere "imitation" or "re-presentation" of action in Aristotelian terms, but with a deeper negotiation of the public sphere by re-constituting real historical situations and events. Invariably, the liberational and developmental aspirations of democracy and democrats patently accord with the goals of modern Nigerian drama and dramatists as expressed in their plays.

Even beyond the selected texts, numerous plays have grappled with the crises of governance in Nigeria within the period. These include Soyinka's repertoire of satirical sketches tagged "*Before the Blowout*". *A play of Giants*, *Requiem for a Futurologist*; Osofisan's *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*; Olu Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender*; Chinyere Okafor's *The Lion and the Iroko*; Fred Agbeyegbe's *The King must Dance Naked*; Ayo Akinwale's *This King Must Die*, Ben Tomolaju's *Jankariwo* and Rasaki Ojo-Bakare's *Rogbodiyan and Drums of War* to mention only a few.⁶

The playwrights construct a social space where power (ab) use is the norm or aberration of social-political interaction depending on the immediate thematic. They also lay bare disorder and corruption apparent in a supposedly democratising order, in order to uncover repressed social contradictions apart from providing reasons for the contraction of opportunities for democratic participation, among which are military authoritarianism, mass poverty and ignorance. For instance, Osofisan's *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* is an eloquent theatrical metaphor aimed at censoring dictatorship. In a way that is somewhat reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo UI*, Aringindin is an attempt to palliate the people's feelings of helplessness and lethargy induced by long alienation from power. It strives to reanimate their being as individuals and collectives toward ridding the society of those repressive forces that have been holding them down. Osofisan contends in the play that a true match to genuine democracy will begin when people are ready to dare the flaming eyes of tyranny, dislodge the stolid Aringindin (a theatrical anticipation of Late General Sanni Abacha) and the Nightwatchmen from the fortress of power.

Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen enacts the ordeal of an unnamed Nigerian community whose peace is constantly assaulted by armed robbers. The robbers unleash a spate of violence on the people, claiming several lives and property. On Aringindin's suggestion, the community set up a night guard squad (*vigilante*) under the leadership of Aringindin. However, the community sooner cedes its liberty to the squad, as a result of the latter's arbitrary actions, all in the name of providing security

for the people. The community sinks deeper into anarchy culminating in the death of Tisa (Aringindin's arch critic) and the abdication of the throne by the community's traditional head, Baale. Baale's exit paves the way for full-blown dictatorship, led by Aringindin and kansillor, his civilian collaborator. It takes the vengeful bullet from Yobioyin (Tisa's fiancée) to end Aringindin's life and his reign of terror.

In terms of stagecraft, a general survey shows that some dramatists adopt dramaturgical conventions to provoke a sneer at identifiable anti-democratic conducts of the elite, both civilian and military. This is found in Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*, Soyinka's *Requiem for a Futurologist* and *From Zia with Love* and *The Beatification of Areaboy: a Lagosian Kaleidoscope*. In another breath, they adopt a dialectical materialist reading of socio-political trajectory of Nigeria and artistically mediate their experience through a synthesis of Bertolt Brecht's theory and practice of 'epic' theatre with communal participatory aesthetics of traditional African performance. Such artistic experiences are found in Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*, Rotimi's *If... a Tragedy of the Ruled* and Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju's *Awaiting Trouble*. Their vision of new democratic Nigeria is articulated through a revolutionary alternative or what Saint Gbilekaa (1997) has tagged "radical" theatrical discourse.

The perceived disempowerment of women in the society as expressed in earlier plays as well as instances of women's empowerment in the epistemology of nation-building have gained the attention of some dramatists. These issues have expectedly generated their own gender-centred theatrical discourse as demonstrated in J.P.

Clark's *The Wives Revolt*, Rotimi Johnson's *The Court of the Queens*, Tess Onwueme's *The Reign Of Wazobia, Tell it to Women: an epic drama for Women* and Chinyere Okafor's *The Lion and the Iroko*. In another category are plays with similar subject of democratic empowerment but which defy easy taxonomy, as they are more receptive to various dramatic influences. Such plays, as Esiaba Irobi's *Mwokedi* and Ahmed Yerima's *The Silent Gods* are eclectic in their dramaturgical responses to the project of democratisation.

For the sake of clarity, the thesis identifies four generic constructs around which its discussion of the aesthetics⁷ of selected plays are structured. These constructs, which are illuminated in Chapter Two, include: the "devaluation", the "trado-epic", the "gynocentric" and the "heteroformic" constructs. They are quite representative of the major possibilities in the theatrical discourse of democratic politics within the period.

Unfortunately, a sustained study of the form, techniques or style generated by democratisation as a thematic focus in Nigerian drama, especially the sub-genre of literary drama of English expression has not been sufficiently attempted. This is not to imply in any way that the present study has not been preceded by some efforts in examining the inter-junction of literature, drama and politics.

One is quite aware of Adrian Roscoe's *Mother is Gold: A Study of West African Literature*, James Booth's *Writers and Politics in Nigeria*, Biodun Jeyifo's *The Truthful Lie: A Sociology of African Drama*, Jide Malomo and Saint Gbilekaa's

Theatre and Politics In Nigeria, Chris Dunton's *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian Drama In English Since 1970*, Simon Umukoro's *Drama and Politics In Nigeria* and Saint Gbilekaa's *Radical Theatre In Nigeria* among others. Nonetheless, these works largely do not present a harmonised analysis of the democratic ferment as articulated in the mechanics of the theatre. The present study addresses this perceived gap in the hermeneutics and criticism of Nigerian drama.

An Appraisal of the Democratic Imperative In Nigeria

Democracy is a complex concept, difficult to define with precision. It is widely believed to be a system of government in which citizens choose their leaders or take other important decisions through voting. It embraces an institutional framework, a socio-political and cultural arrangement that permits the participation of a broad segment of the society in the running of the affairs of the state, in the production and distribution of resources.

Democracy has gained a wide acclaim among scholars of modern development, New World Order and Globalisation as political arrangement necessary for economic transformation of the society. Democracy has been proffered as a key element in development theory because it is a necessary order for the harnessing and distribution of national resources toward combating misery, unemployment, illiteracy and gender/racial/class oppression. Popular democratic participation provides impetus for the people and creates necessary socio-political environment for their

empowerment. Larry Diamond in *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* corroborates this assertion when he submits, “Democracies appear in the long run to respond better to the needs of the poor and marginalized, because they enable such groups to organize and mobilize within the political process” (7). This is more so in the period commonly referred to as the Post-Cold War era in international political parlance, i.e., the 1980s and 1990s. However, democracy has an abiding history of currency since its Athenian origin.

At the basis of the various organic systems of law, processes of securing legitimacy, patterns of authority and social relations lay the concept of power, which is the very substance of politics. Politics is about the allocation and exercise of power. But who and what constitute power? A privileged few or a substantial majority? Where is the locus of control in a community? These questions have remained crucial in determining the mode of governance existing in any society since the origin of Man. Underlying theories of democracy is the need to guarantee the liberty of citizens, check the tendency to wield power arbitrarily by a minority on the one hand, and to ensure a broad participation of people in state affairs on the other. This signals a polemical gulf between democracy and various archetypes of elitist or minority rule like autocracy, monarchy, fascism, authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

Across several generations and cultures, democracy has been conceived and defined in diverse ways by political thinkers and philosophers. For Pericles and Aristotle, in democracy, the administration of the state is in the hands of “many” and

not the “few”. Aristotle contrasts democracy with oligarchic form of government practised in the then war-mongering state of Sparta. Cohen in *Democracy* quotes Aristotle as saying that: “We may lay it down generally that a system which does not allow every citizen to share is oligarchical (oligos, few) and that one which does so is democratic” (3).

The hub of classical conception of democracy given above is the role of “demos” (people) in governance. This has considerably influenced its later denotation as a social and political concept. The idea of modern democracy is succinctly expressed in the commonly cited Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address of November 19, 1863; “... government of the people, by the people, for the people”.

Democracy rejects a monolithic power structure in which individuals are submerged under a leader’s rule as witnessed under a totalitarian regime. Rather, it embraces social groups in society as centres of political participation. The groups - social, political, professional and religious - provide a basis for the dispersal of power. They act as check against the domination of power by a strong group.

Consensus has been difficult to secure on the nature and meaning of democracy over time. This crisis of signification is due to the system’s innate dynamism and infinite complexity on the one hand, and its susceptibility to certain local political ethos and cultural habits especially those that accord with its cardinal principles on the other. Elitist theorists of democracy like Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michaels, Karl Mannheim and John Stuart Mills have pronounced on

the impracticability of people ruling. Political power, as Bottomore observes in *Elites and Society* is always exercised by minorities who constitute the elite (112). Such elitist and excluding theory derives inspiration, perhaps, from Athens where the system earns its etymology. Athenian democracy excluded slave, children, women and resident aliens. Michael Etherton in *The Development of African Drama* notes that slaves were accorded no benefits accrued to free Greek citizens and were regarded as “mere tools”. (117). Indeed, slaves in classical Greece were slaughtered as sacrificial animals to the gods in order to purify the society from the iniquities of the preceding year.

Owing to the empirical problems presented by the classical model of democracy, different societies try to arrive at a certain form of participation, direct or indirect, which gives protection to the interest of the majority, while not undermining that of the minority, hence, the terms consociation democracy, liberal democracy, representative democracy, socialist democracy, majority rule and polyarchy. These modes commonly involve election and party system through which periodic contest for power among eligible individuals and/or collectives are organised. On account of this, democracy is, oftentimes, erroneously reduced to ‘mere competition’ for office between political parties or as competition between elites for political power.

The notion of democracy and democratisation in this study transcends the formal confine of party politics, election and contest for power among elites. Here, democracy refers to a process and practice of harmonising diverse socio-political

interests of groups that constitute the society. The system guarantees the right of citizens to participate either directly or indirectly in decision-making, and thereby, foster the mobilisation of human potentials toward national development.

The submission above is the lesson of Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*. The oligarchy of Erhuwaren is forced to recognise the values of popular sovereignty and equality as essential ingredients of democracy. The withdrawal at the end, of an edict that authorises the killing of goats signals the emergence of a new polity in Erhuwaren. Goats are the pillars of the economy of womenfolk in this community and their ban by men is a means of further ensuring the women's exclusion from political participation. The new Erhuwaren that emerges after the return of the women from their rebellious exile embraces equality and freedom of all citizens regardless of sex or class, to have a say in the community's affairs.

Though democracy does not necessarily lead to economic prosperity, its innate mechanism of co-operation can facilitate that as it unleashes the creative energies of citizens towards increased productivity. In principle, democracy provides sufficient freedom toward self-realisation of individuals and collectives. As Diamond puts it in *Developing Democracy*, democracy also provides "the best for people to protect and advance their shared interests"(3).

Besides, democracy needs to be supported by a free independent and impartial judiciary - a judiciary insulated from corruption. It is a bulwark against injustice and warped penology which turn the nation into a veritable prison yard as depicted in the

experiences of Lateef, Jangidi, Ndem, Okolo and Darudapo in Segun Oyekunle's *katakata For Suffer head* and those of Emuke, Detiba, Domingo and other inmates of General Cell (Amorako Local Government) in Soyinka's *From Zia With Love*. The attempts by soldiers in *The Beatification of Area Boy* to clear the shopping plaza and the streets of Area boys in preparation for a traditional wedding between Sanda and Miseyi underscores the severity of violence in the nation. Sanda is the king of Area boys while Miseyi is the daughter of the well-connected ex-minister of Oil and Petroleum Resources, Prof. Samatu. The Area boys are notorious criminals, ex-convicts, racketeers, bullies, enforcers and extortionists. But the police and soldiers are shown to be more vicious in their extortion. The mode of operation of the Area boys is somewhat akin to that of the state and its agents especially in the use of force, arbitrariness and violence. There is a thin line that separates the state's disposition to violence and that of the underworld, which is the universe of Sanda and the Area boys. Decipherable in the general tone of angst that permeates through these plays is a desire for a political system that makes violence unattractive as an option in the resolution of social conflicts, through its characteristic support for dialogue and rejection of force.

Democratisation is the process of actualising the foregoing conception of democracy. It is therefore, a process of inducting and socialising the citizenry into a political system that hinges on rule by consent (rather than coercion), social justice and equitable distribution of power and responsibilities. It is, in the Nigerian example and as obtained in many countries in Africa, a process of transition from a monolithic

and absolutist power configurations toward a political pluralism. It is a movement toward a regime that promotes individual and group liberties and guarantees same. It is different from an autocratic order that violates them as a matter of course. The ultimate goal is to ensure that power is exercised ostensibly in the overall interest of the people. Many scholars of African development crises in post-independence period have traced the causes of under-development and political instability to the absence of genuine democracy and the persistence of authoritarianism, either of military dictatorship or one party civilian rule. They contend that governance in post independence Africa recurs closely to the repression perpetrated by colonial administrations, hence, it is anything but democratic. "By the mid-1970s, political participation, public accountability, the rule of law and defense of human rights increasingly became rare commodities in the governance of African societies", writes Ayang' Nyong'o in *Popular Struggle for Democracy in Africa* (37).

Dictatorship tends to deny people's rights and freedom, and when people are not free and their choices curtailed, it becomes difficult to mobilise them for development. In view of this, democratic revolution seems to hold a brighter prospect for development and actualisation of the visions of independence especially freedom and empowerment. Consequently, the struggle for democracy in ex-colonies like Nigeria occupies a central place in the agenda for a true liberation of the people.

The quest for genuine democracy in modern times is as strident as the call by nationalists for self-rule and independence from colonialists in the 1940s and 1950s.

The authoritarian post-independence regimes plagued by instability, corruption and mass poverty have made democracy a necessary and compelling option. Francis Fukuyama is quite right when he submits in his celebrated book; *The End of History and the Last Man* that “the most remarkable development of the last quarter of the twentieth century has been the revelation of enormous weaknesses at the core of the world’s seemingly strong dictatorships, whether they be of the military authoritarian Right or the Communist-totalitarian Left” (xiii). What is in contention is whether in the case of Nigeria, for example, what obtains now is truly democratic.

Unfortunately, Nigeria cannot be said to have experienced a truly democratic polity since independence. Eme Awa buttresses the view when from a political scientist’s perspective; he defines democracy in Nigeria as “government of the people by the elites essentially in the interest of the elites”(13). Perhaps, this skeptical viewpoint informs Claude Ake’s sweeping dismissal in *Democracy and Development in Africa* of all Nigerian governments without exception as being “anti-democratic”(23).

It is understandable from the foregoing that some commentators are wont to see democracy’s Post-Cold War currency as America’s domineering effort to whip the rest of the world in line with its capitalist hegemony. But its innate allure recommends the system for practice in developed and developing nations. Perhaps, its alluring prospects account for its adoption at independence in late 1950s and 1960s by many African nations including Nigeria. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, the system did not

survive beyond the first decade of the post-independence era as it was terminated on January 15, 1966. Consequently, parliamentary democracy collapsed and gave way to a cycle of feral military dictatorship with a brief civilian interregnum between 1979 and 1983. This reality has foisted on the nation, an authoritarian culture, which experts argue, has impaired development in all spheres. Efforts to erect a virile democracy since then have been attended by outright failures, or indeed, illusory successes⁸.

The phenomenon of prolonged instability has considerably engaged the attention of researchers of socio-political engineering in Africa and beyond. Adejumo and Momoh in *The Political Economy of Nigeria Under Military Rule (1984-1993)* for instance, have argued incisively on effects of certain variables like leadership and economy on democratisation. The tribulations and subversions that have attended democratisation projects in Nigeria (Africa) are well documented by Adamolekun (1985), Ayeni and Soremekun (1988), Caron et al. (1992), Ake (1994) and Olowu et al. (1995). Claude Ake in *Democracy of Disempowerment in Africa* has observed that what obtains in many African states is a phenomenon of “democratization of disempowerment” which “does not appear emancipatory” (1). Ake argues that it is an exercise in which people periodically troop out to vote without necessarily participating in governance.

Julius Ihonvbere shares similar view in the essay “Democratization in Africa” when he notes that democratisation in Nigeria “has not created a real transition in the form of a clear abandonment of the old dictatorial and suffocated past in favour of a

new popular and democratic dispensation” (374). Still obviously lacking in this situation of “much motion without movement” is the empowerment of the people. Politics in the 1980s and 1990s in the country to a large extent remains what it was in the 1960s -“an activity of the few and rich, with the masses serving as spectators or objects of manipulation” (375).

However, Jackson and Rosenberg as well as Joseph make significant attempts to isolate for clear attention, major obstacles on the road to democracy in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. These include the anti-democratic deeds of the ruling elite. Jackson and Rosenberg’s *Personal Rule In Black Africa* and Richard Joseph’s *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria* account for elite’s predilection for manipulating the democratic process not only to gain power but also to exercise and retain the power for personal rather than communal ends. Jean-Francois Bayart (1993) succinctly describes this reality as “politics of the belly”.

In different but related studies, John Wiseman (1993) and Stephen Ellis (1995) investigate important internal and external factors that have sponsored democratic reforms and have inspired greater concern with democratisation in Third World countries. Some of these factors include the collapse of Communist single party rule in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union⁹.

The discourse on democratisation and democratic governance in Africa as surveyed above are largely incisive in their presentation of theories and practices of democracy. The same thing can be said of their analyses of acknowledged democratic

ethos and their subversions. Nonetheless, these works are mostly conceived and executed through the investigative codes and lenses of the Social Sciences. They are to that extent, restrictive, as they are oblivious of equally incisive and practical configurations in the literary and performing arts. Democracy, by contrast, is a multi-dimensional social concept that requires a broad investigative framework in order to come to terms with its innate complexity. It is a dynamic phenomenon whose historicity and epistemological essence are better sought from diverse fields of socio-cultural discourse including drama and theatre. This theoretical assumption therefore, provides a justification for the thesis.

Scholars, practitioners and critics of the theatre have established that drama and politics are not mutually exclusive but inherently complementary. That supposition informs the works of many a Nigerian dramatist. Apart from exposing social flaccidity in artistically permissible forms, drama generates through its aesthetics, useful ideas that can facilitate the development of a stable democratic culture. Drama is a vital medium through which a polity can propagate values of democracy like justice, equity, popular sovereignty and accountability. Hence, it is used to sharpen political awareness about rights and obligations among citizens, about responsibility and accountability in government among leaders, about gender equality and minority rights. Ken Saro-Wiwa in his prison diary - *A Month and a Day* – asserts that “indeed, literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics, by intervention, and writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused, critical look at

society. They must play an interventionist role” (81). This largely explains the thought behind several plays of established and emerging Nigerian playwrights. The idea also provides inspiration for a good number of student performances during the annual Nigerian Universities Theatre Arts Festivals (NUTAF) ¹⁰. In these festivals, drama expresses the need to promote the ethos of democracy and halt the process of militarisation that has turned the country into a centralised polity with a command system of government. But of cardinal interest to the present study are the literary and theatrical elements adopted in dramatising such democratic concerns.

Drama and Democratic Governance in Nigeria

Admittedly, the factor of colonialism has made political engagement a common denominator of Nigerian drama and theatre. This is well established in the pioneering efforts of Hubert Ogunde and his African Music Research Party in the 1940s through to 1960s¹¹. However, the challenges of democracy have been more trenchantly re-presented in drama especially literary drama from 1980 to date. As the military becomes entrenched in the nation’s politics, Nigerian drama’s political engagement assumes a more critical dimension.

. Theatre history has established the contiguity of drama and democracy. Drama is naturally a multiple art requiring co-operation and consent of several personnel in order to harmonise words with histrionic, scenery with music. The

aesthetics of drama is fully realised only when its matter is transformed into the context of performance, necessitating agreement and distribution of roles among players, producers and the audience. In this sense, drama shares the values of democracy. Harmony, unity and co-operation even in the face of delimitation of power and responsibilities are essential ethos common to drama and democracy.

Evidently, it is not only in the present dispensation that drama is employed to seek solutions to the inadequacies of a subsisting political order in Nigeria. Indeed, historians of traditional African theatre have established that the indigenous dramatic traditions of various ethnic nationalities that constitute Nigeria had been used to make political statements that border on good conduct of public affairs, from Hausa '*Wasan Gauta*' to Yoruba '*Alarinjo*' and satiric festivals, Tiv *Kwagh-hir* and Igbo masquerade performance¹².

The above-mentioned theatrical traditions have not been shown to be essentially subversive of, and threatening to the monarchical and quasi-republican mode of traditional governance in most of these communities. However, the participatory mechanism of the indigenous theatre holds much in terms of inspiration for the modern dramatist especially in the use of song, music, dance, costume and story telling.

Nonetheless, more than any other theatrical mode like the Concert and opera, Travelling theatre, Television and Radio drama series, Photo-magazine drama, and of late, the Home Video tradition, literary drama has been more responsive to the

democratic fervour in the country. The European forms of Concert and Opera popular in Lagos in the late nineteenth century occupy a historical threshold between the traditional and modern theatre. In the agenda of its organisers, it was to enhance the social and cultural annexation of the colony by colonialists. These entertainment forms could not be accused of being critical of Europeans' appropriation of Africans' economic and political power through colonialism. The Concert was borrowed from Europe and was popularised ostensibly for the entertainment and recreational needs of expatriate public officers and educated Africans (new elites) who considered it necessary to remould their taste and habits in manners acceptable to Europeans. The Concert and its operatic form was therefore, another expression of the colonialists' messianic goal of moulding "civilized beings" out of "primitive Africans". It was less pre-occupied with unsettling the authoritarianism of the colonial order, at least, not until the injection of indigenous folkloric elements and its enlistment in the nationalist anti-colonial campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s. Echeruo further illuminates this submission in "Concert and Theatre in Late Nineteenth Century Lagos"(357-69).

Much the same can be said of the antecedents of modern literary drama in the dramaturgy of James Ene Henshaw and the dramatic writings of Onitsha Market Literature. Henshaw's plays which are models of the latter are not distinguished by democratic agitations. From *This is our Chance* to *Jewels of the Shrine*, *A Man of Character*, *Dinner for Promotion*, *Magic in the Blood*, *Companion for a Chief* and *Enough is Enough*, Henshaw is more pre-occupied with themes of morality, custom

and African cultural identity. In a similar vein, what actually dominate Onitsha Market Literature are dramatic writings, which are like love tracts in dialogue form, having the conventional 'act' and 'scenes' delineation and with little consideration for theatrical perfection. As Adrian Roscoe submits in *Mother is Gold*, the central objectives of these pieces are to document history, offer practical suggestions on how to secure the love of the opposite sex and sustain the relationship. They are also to bring money and fame to their producers (143-44).

The decades of 1960s witnessed a burst of creative energies of western educated playwrights like Soyinka, Clark, Rotimi, Wale Ogunyemi and Sony Oti who were equally versed in elements of indigenous performances. Interestingly, the lacklustre performances of politicians after independence and the betrayal too soon of expectations held out by independence necessitated a dramaturgy that could not afford the political insularity of Onitsha Market Literature. The Westminster liberal democracy adopted at independence for a number of reasons like ethnic rivalry and corruption did not survive beyond 1966. It gave way to prolonged military rule, characterised by subversion of principles of federalism and intense concentration of power in the hands of a few military officers at the centre. These officers wield legislative, executive and sometimes adjudicatory powers. Efforts to hush autocracy from the polity since then can find comparison only in the mythical Sisyphean task that is marked by predictable futility. Dramatists have grappled with this reality through varying artistic manners and methods.

Through the festival construct in *A Dance of the Forests* (staged to celebrate Independence), Soyinka anticipates the collapse of the tender democracy and the long drawn absolutism. Whether in the community of the Dead summoned by the human world to celebrate “the Gathering of the Tribes” or among the mythical dwellers of the forests like Eshuoro and Ogun, or in the theatrically exhumed medieval court of Mata Kharibu, intolerance, selfishness and narcissism pass as norms. The play alerts Nigerians to the dearth in the public sphere of attitudinal traits necessary for a successful and enduring democracy. It warns that a political arrangement founded on such habits listed above is fated to inevitable disaster. Soyinka’s numerous satirical sketches of the sixties titled “Before the Blackout” commonly denounce assault on democratic norms and values by politicians of the First Republic. He also dramatises the shrinking of opportunities for popular participation in governance against the backdrop of continual authoritarianism, superintended by the military in *Kongi’s Harvest*, *Jero’s Metamorphosis* and *Opera Wonyosi*.

Ola Rotimi is a playwright who is always concerned about the crisis of governance in Africa in his art. For example, he exposes the attenuation of prospects of democracy through the selfishness of the elite in *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. Earlier, the recurring problem of leadership arising from this anomaly is confronted in *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. But Rotimi’s polemical ardour here is problematised by his choice of classical conventions of tragedy, which usually end in the affirmation of prevailing authoritarian hegemony. Neither the exile of

kurunmi nor the deposition of Ovonramwen throws up in replacement, a people-centred governance.

Perhaps, the same can be said of J.P. Clark's *Ozidi* - a theatrical performance of Ijaw epic- and *Song of a Goat*. The manifestations of intrigues and power contestations against the old and young Ozidi, for instance, bear only a suspect lesson for a democratic agenda. The exploration of African pantheon to make artistic statements as evident in Ogunyemi's *Obaluwaye*, Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* as well as a theatrical re-investigation of African history in Ogunyemi's *Kiriji*, Ladipo's *Moremi* and Sofola's *King Emene* respectively do not have as their declared focus, issues of democracy and democratisation.

The afore-mentioned plays express the temper of the age or what Osofisan describes in his Inaugural Lecture - "Playing Dangerously..." - as "our nation's age of innocence" (11). They are marked by a variety of aesthetics consciously patterned after western dramatic forms of tragedy like Clark's *The Raft* and *Song of a Goat*. They also experiment with a synthesis of Occidental theatrical conventions and traditional African elements of performance. The dominant figure on the stage is a monocratic figure that embodies power and authority and others are subordinate to him. The stage is, to adopt Osofisan's phrase, " a pageant of kings and princes, a parade of royal figures" (17). The artistic trope of unicentricism is couched in poetic, sometimes confounding language or "technique of distanciation" (25) which alienates the audience.

The perceived limitations of the theatrical discourse of the age of innocence inform the artistic revaluation witnessed from the 1980s to date. In this era, dramatists are pre-occupied with freeing politics of dictatorial ethos toward a democratic re-ordering of power relations in the country. They have kept democratisation constantly in the burning furnace of public discourse, either through their disapprobation of dictatorship or in the envisioned paths to a new order.

The period witnessed dissolution of the mythocentric and historical aesthetics of the 60s and 70s and their re-composition in *The Reign of Wazobia*, *The Silent Gods*, *Nwokedi* and *Jankariwo* among other plays. Also dissolved is the traditional genre of tragedy and comedy in the classical ideation as explored in plays like *Ozidi*, *The Gods are not To Blame* and *Evangelist Jeremiah*.

Within its scope, the thesis investigates the patterns and forms of theatrical articulation of the playwrights' pre-occupation with democracy. Eight plays are selected for analyses. Chapter Two examines cardinal theoretical issues in the criticism of modern African drama. It also provides an insight into the four aesthetic constructs through which the diverse experience of democratic imperative as recorded by playwrights are synthesised. The next four chapters are devoted to textual analyses. Chapter Three discusses the devaluation construct in Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* and Soyinka's *From Zia With Love*. Chapter Four analyses the trado-epic aesthetics in Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* and Oloruntoba-Oju's *Awaiting Trouble*. Chapter Five investigates the gender factor in democratisation as inscribed

into the discourse of Nigerian literary drama with textual illustrations drawn from Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* and Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*. Chapter Six studies the heteroformic or eclectic option adopted by Esiaba Irobi and Ahmed Yerima in *Nwokedi* and *The Silent Gods* respectively.

The concluding chapter provides among other things, a summary and re-affirmation of democratisation as a complex social concept that has received diverse aesthetic attention as evident in the literary and theatrical techniques of the studied plays. The approach enhances our grasp of the epistemological dynamics of democracy as a tool for good governance. It also contributes to the hermeneutics of Nigerian drama in contemporary times.

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N O T E S

1. This point has earlier been made in my "Director's Note" to the production of Osofisan's *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*. The play was performed at the Pit Theatre, Obafemi Awolowo University, and Ile Ife on January 14-15, 1998.
2. Although Nigeria is one of the largest producers of oil in the world, the sixth to be specific, its Human Development Index (HDI) rank below that of oil-producing countries like Mexico, Uruguay, Libya, Indonesia and Algeria. Nigeria is ranked as one of the 25 poorest nations in the world. As the 1998 Human Development Report on Nigeria puts it, this is a curious paradox of poverty in the midst of wealth nurtured by mismanagement, instability, corruption and arbitrariness.
3. For a detailed account of instances of human rights violation under the military, see the Civil Liberty Organisation (CLO) *Annual Report on the state of Human Rights in Nigeria from 1996 to 2000*. See also reports on the same subject by Amnesty International and Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR) during this period.
4. Nigeria witnessed such botched democratisation on December 31, 1983; June 23, 1993; November 17, 1993; June 8, 1998.
5. 'Drama' and 'Theatre' are used in the thesis interchangeably. So also dramatic 'text' and 'performance'.
6. Although Ayo Akinwale's "This King Must Die" and Ben Tomolaju's "Jankariwo" are yet to be published as at the time of writing this thesis, I have watched their stage performances at the Africa Hall, University of Ilorin (1987) and Pit Theatre, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife (1988) respectively.
7. Aesthetics is the study of beauty in the realm of art, literature and music. It is used in this study to refer to those principles of form or compositional elements through which symmetry or an appreciable measure of perfection is achieved in drama and theatre. Our usage of the term however, takes into cognisance,

the import of the subject in the final articulation of the playwright's form and theatrical devices.

8. Nigeria has experienced two futile attempts at democratisation (1960-1966, 1979- 1983) and two botched attempts to transit from military rule to Civilian democracy (1987-1993, 1994-1998).
9. Other factors identified by Wiseman for example, include the following:
 - (i) The withdrawal of external supports for authoritarian regimes by the United States of America and the Soviet Union at the end of the bi-polar hostility called Cold War.
 - (ii) The hegemonic capabilities of Western Europe and America expressed through policies of Globalisation and New World Order.
 - (iii) The insistence of foreign donors, aid agencies, World Bank and International Monetary Fund on minimum democratic reforms as part of the conditions attached to aids and loans.
 - (iv) The failure of post-independence regimes to live up to expectation as evident in increasing wave of poverty, crime, unemployment, human rights abuse, instability, economic management, nepotism and administrative inefficiency.
 - (v) The development of mass movements and Non-governmental Organisation (NGOs) advocating for democracy.
 - (vi) The consistent failure of the military to correct the advertised ills of civilians in government and the military's inability to organise a successful transition to genuine democracy.
 - (vii) The collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the emergence of an independent Namibia in 1990.
10. Nigerian Universities Theatre Arts Festival (NUTAF) founded in 1980 is annually organised by the Nigerian Universities Theatre Arts Students Association (NUTASA). The festival is hosted in turn by students of Dramatic/Theatre/Performing/Creative Arts in accordance with a pre-arranged order. Each university produces a play during the festival, usually written by students. Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die* are products of these festivals. They were the entries of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1987 and 1988 respectively.

11. Ogunde condemns social injustice in colonialism – a system of domination and deprivation - in “Worse than Crime”(1945), “Strike and Hunger”, “Tiger’s Empire”(1946), “Herbert Macaulay”(1946) and “Towards Liberty”(1947). He also responds to the excesses of post-independence politics in Western Nigeria under the Premiership of Samuel Ladoke Akintola with “Yoruba Ronu” (Yoruba Think, 1964) and “Otito Koro” (Truth is Bitter, 1965).
12. See the following articles in Yemi Ogunbiyi’s *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981; E.O. Kofoworola “Traditional Forms of Hausa Drama” (164-80). Joel Adedeji, “Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre” (221-47); Edith Enem “The Kwagh-Hir Theatre” (249-51).

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CHAPTER TWO

TEXTUALITY, POL(Y)EMICS AND THEORIES OF REPRESENTATION/RESPONSE IN AFRICAN DRAMA.

There has been a steady conflict of critical theories among literary experts since the beginning of the twentieth century. The study of African drama is a theatre where the intensity of this conflict is well played out, as evident in several compelling framework of analysis adopted by different schools of criticism. This chapter surveys competing theoretical and critical approaches decipherable in the investigation of drama and theatre in Africa. Against the background of drama's conceptual vibrancy as text, performance and cultural artefact, it argues for and expounds a generic approach to the study of Nigerian (African) drama¹. Moreover, it provides a theoretical foundation for the analysis of modern Nigerian drama's responses to issues of democratisation.

Theory, Literary Creation and Consumption

The aesthetic experience is a holistic experience whose significance is measured beyond the creative process. For any literary art, the process of concretising raw ideational data into a novel, drama, poetry or short story is as significant as the process of consumption or reception. The latter (which nurtures criticism) involves an audience and formal artistic elements that the writer adopts to establish the

“literariness” of the literary work and express his perception of the universe. But that is not all there is to the critical process as it embraces the distillation of aesthetic data in the service of exegesis and evaluation. According to Monroe Beardsley, a renowned philosopher of art, “judging” which implies the search for and realisation of the aesthetic value of an object is one of the various activities associated with aesthetics. In his collection of essays on the Aesthetic Point of View, he opines that the amount of aesthetic value of an object is a function of the degree of aesthetic gratification it is capable of providing in a particular experience of it, especially when correctly and completely experienced (27). The gratification may range from surprise to inspiration, disgust or elation. But they are essentially obtainable from the object’s internal congruity measurable in terms of unity, harmony, proportion, order and balance in its structure or compositional design.

The search for aesthetic value inspires critical evaluation. This enterprise, which has been described by Immanuel Kant, as “aesthetic Judgment” remains the seedbed of literary criticism. Beardsley also argues that criticism stems from the need to evaluate and select among available courses of action, using certain criteria or conditions (148).

The complexity of criticism as a literary art has been widely acknowledged. It takes as its legitimate frame of reference, each and all of the above-mentioned processes, from conception to reception or consumption. In its distillation of facts about the nature of human experience embodied in the artwork, criticism involves

principles of organisation, which in the main are to mediate the chaos of imaginative materials recorded. Theories, as these principles of organisation are called, are age-long allies of criticism. A critical discourse is more meaningful when conducted against the background of a theory. Not only does a theory come to terms with the perceptual representation of ideas in nature by the author, it guides their deciphering by the critic and the audience. It also informs the evaluative responses they generate from either or both of them.

Although theory may be delimiting, deterministic and may generate a somewhat predictable response to a work of art, what needs to be stressed is that it provides an organic relational platform for the 'parts' (the compositional elements) and the 'whole' (the text). Besides, theory superintends the interaction between the 'lie' of imagination and the 'truth' of direct reality of the universe. Jeyifo is quite right when he describes theory as "the power of generalization which permits us to see the connections, the underlying or overarching relations within and between things, and between dispersed, separate phenomena..." (19). Because of its harmonising and mediatory outlook, theory can introduce symmetry into a natural "disorder" of literary experience.

Nonetheless, since Plato's strictures against arts and artists in *The Republic* and Aristotle's defence of mimesis in *Poetics*, critical theory from the classical period had been preternaturally pluralistic. This plurality cannot be separated from the multi-

sidedness of literary experience itself. Hence, the almost inexhaustible frames of analysing literature developed over time.

As earlier observed, there has been a consistent conflict of interpretive codes among various schools of literary theory and the critical evaluation of African literature has not been spared. Critics have to contend with epistemic binaries of oral/written, engage/d'engage art, political/apolitical thought, universal/particularistic perspective, significant/immanent notion of aesthetics and textual/extra-textual hermeneutics.

From available evidence, three issues have engaged the attention of many a perceptive critic of modern African literature. First is the proliferation of literary theories and critical approaches. Adebayo Williams aptly sums up the situation as a "crisis of consciousness". Abiola Irele in his essay: "Literary Criticism in the Nigerian Context" has observed with palpable disquiet, what he calls the "profusion of theories, methods and approaches":

Literary criticism has been moved beyond, in something of a forced march, into such diverse territories as psychoanalysis, Russian formalism, phenomenology, structuralism and semiotics, and more recently, "deconstruction".

There is now such a proliferation of theories and of schools that the discipline can no longer be said to have a fixed centre of canons and procedures (94).

To this list, one may add Marxism, Feminism (in all its polemical mutations, whether radical, liberal or African womanist), post-modernism and post-colonialism.

Jeyifo's remark in "Literary Theory and Theories of Decolonization" is equally relevant in this regard:

Thus, properly speaking, in engaging literary theory, one should talk of theories and reinforce this pluralized enunciation with the image of a carnivalesque parade: Classical and Post-marxist Marxisms; Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic schools; old and new historicisms; speech act, reader-response and semiotic textual theories; deconstruction and post-modernisms; French and Anglo-American, Western and non-Western feminisms etc, etc. (4).

All these theoretical approaches have found crucial manifestations in diverse exegetical praxis in recent times. As such, the criticism of African literature is much like a new yam feast superintended by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Carl Jung, I.A. Richard, Roman Jakobson, Victor Shklovsky, Boris Elkhénbaum, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, George Lucaks, Karl Marx and Julia Kristeva among others.

The immense diversity of theories and theorists is not objectionable in itself. Infact, the natural dynamism of aesthetic experiences on the one hand, and the multi-sidedness of human nature on the other, support such diversity. What many critics and scholars have often decried is the domination of the art of theorising by Euro-American sensibilities and the concomitant peripheralisation of African discourse. For instance, Femi Osofisan in "Theatre and the Rites of Post-Negritude Remembering"

decries the West-centric conception of post-coloniality and post-modernity by certain critics. The conception informs a mis-reading of African texts, African writers and their missions by such critics. Helen Gilbert and Joannes Tompkins demonstrate this tendency in *Postcolonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. According to Osofisan, “the postcolonial debate itself is inspired from the West with its firm control and manipulation of the technology of communication. Hence, Africa, the postcolonial country itself is marginal to the postcolonial debate” (1).

Arising from this reality is the second burning issue in the criticism of African literature. Critical evaluation of African writing seems not only as an epistemic derivation of Europe and America (the putative epicentres of literary scholarship) but also as a marginal presence in metropolitan pool of theories. Irele expresses this worry in an earlier essay: “The Criticism of Modern African Literature” when he states:

The terms of reference of evaluating modern African Literature are being provided at the moment by the critical tradition, which has grown up alongside Western literature (13)

Scholars who hold this view query the totalising and universalising tendencies of western critical theorists and the consequent occlusion of historical and cultural realities of Africa especially when such occlusion privileges the West. As a remedy, these scholars favour the formulation of an African poetics or such framework of analysis, which though may not be too exclusively African, is sufficiently independent

of western formulation to free it from Eurocentric condescension. That concern is expressed in the works of Nwoga (1976) and Chinweizu et al. (1980) among others.

The third issue, which has also stirred as yet irresolvable contention in literary discourse, is the predilection of certain theories to exaggerate the purity of the text² or the autonomy of literary creation in a bid to stress the 'literariness' of literature. That implies an intense concentration on formal compositional patterns, structuring principles, diction and other signifying elements that are intrinsic to the text. It also implies the undermining of social, historical, cultural and other diachronic and extrinsic elements that lie beyond the text even when the text is evidently shaped and conditioned by these elements. As Terry Eagleton opines in *The Function of Criticism*, such critical approaches centre a "disengagement from any particular worldly engagement" while denying the affinity of text with social landscape (69). Russian formalism (with its tendency to privilege form over content) and New Criticism of Americans in the 1920s illustrate these problematic. They are also reinforced in Structuralism of Levi-Strauss and Saussure, Post Structuralism, and Semiotics among other attempts to push the methods of literary criticism close to those of science.

The occlusion of existential data from exegetical practice finds greater affirmation in the late 1970s and culminates in the "deconstructionism" of Derrida and Foucault, and the gleeful celebration of the putative "death of the author" by the French philosopher and theorist Roland Barthes. Of course, the rallying point is the canonisation of textuality, which according to Edward Said has "become the exact

antithesis and displacement of what might be called history". The modus operandi of literary theory within that context as Said explains in "Secular Criticism" is "not to appropriate anything that is worldly, circumstantial or socially contaminated".

Said is more lucid in his summary of this theoretical disposition:

Literary theory has for the most part isolated textuality from the circumstances, the events, the physical senses that made it possible and render it intelligible as the result of human work (606).

Perhaps, the concept of "écriture" especially its signification of writing as a self-referential and autonomous entity provides the substratum of the "disappearance of the author" articulated by Derrida. The author's hitherto ontological activities in the production of text and meaning are effaced, drowned in an intense concentration of the critic on the internal architectonics of the work, that is, on "signs" and "difference", and other arid diktat of deconstruction. The focus of critical evaluation in deconstruction shifts from the author and sociological details to the text itself in its purely isolated and personalised form. Derrida captures the centering of the text by deconstruction when he declares: "...il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (There is no outside text). (Adams and Searle, 7).

Derrida in *Writing and Difference* opposes the fixity of a reading and affirms the indeterminacy of textual signification. His "deconstruction" sees interpretation as a continuous process, "each act deconstructing the previous one in endless movement" (17). He frowns at determinism of linearity or unity implied by genre or

historical classifications. Reading is, therefore, aimed at freeing the text from the notion of “ a centre or origin of recoverable meaning” and the role of the critic in this context is to show how text resists interpretation. Barthes while arguing for the “Death” of the author expresses similar position more clearly in the following words:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the author –God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture (170).

But the crucial question naturally inspired by the foregoing exposition is of what relevance to African dramatic discourse is a literary theory and practice that centres the severance of literature from its humanistic mooring? What is the value of an interpretive schema that shuts out existential realities of daily life, politics, social productions and economic relations from its focus of attention?

The answer is not far fetched. A theoretical investigation of Africa drama in particular and African literature in general that undermines or outright denies its sociality is flawed. The isolation or personalisation of text in the mode of deconstruction is also objectionable. The production and consumption processes of African drama whether pre-colonial or post-colonial are inextricably linked with socio-historical and cultural conditions. Critical consciousness should, as a matter of fact, acknowledge and reflect these conditions.

In this, Said's observation is quite apt:

Texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and even they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted... The realities of power and authority... are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics. I propose that these realities are what should be taken account of by criticism and critical consciousness (607)

There is need to steer the criticism of African literature away from a probable tourniquet to which "textual purity" and critical "non-interference" is likely to propel it. This "text-centric" approach, as Niyi Osundare remarks in "African Literature and the Crisis of Post Structuralist Theorizing" has "demonstrated little or no adequacy in the apprehension, analysis and articulation of African writing and its long troubled context" (18).

A criticism of literature in African context that is dissociated from the historical and anthropological events as well as common political experience is inadequate. Indeed, the universes that African playwrights (especially those studied in this thesis) configure in their works reflect a striking similarity with situations in ancient and contemporary Africa. In view of this, criticism needs to secure a balance between art and life, between literature and politics and between form and context. It must recognise the art work as a significant record of social experience as well as a careful structuring of formal elements. It is against the backdrop of the above notion

of art that we adopt the generic critical framework through which we seek fresh perspectives on democratisation in Nigeria literary drama.

Trends in Critical Discourse of Nigerian Drama

The issue of critical standard or criteria for the evaluation of African literature especially those written in foreign languages – English, French and Portuguese – are somewhat problematic. Should it be judged by those criteria produced in the evolutionary high points of Western literary scholarship or by a set of indigenous codes developed with due cognisance of oral tradition and socio-historical particularities of Africa? The debate sparked off between proponents of the former (universalists) and the latter (nationalists) in various attempts to address the question is much alive. So also is the epistemic insularity or autonomy of the text as championed by auto-nominalists³ (like structuralists, deconstructionists and semioticians) as well as the recognition of the interconnection between writing and its sponsoring milieu canvassed by correlativists.

Heated debates between the Universalists and Nationalists feature in Roscoe's *Mother is Gold*, Heywood's *Perspectives on African Literature*, Wright's *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature* and Ogunbiyi's *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* among other seminal works. The problematic of the debate ostensibly hinge on the adoption of a colonialist language by the African writer to express African experience. The socio-historical factor responsible for this choice notwithstanding, the criticism of

such a work is inherently problematised by the choice that the critic has to make between an interpretive schema that recognises the cultural specifics inscribed into the works by its African origin and a framework that affirms its universality. Of course, one cannot ignore the political import of the puzzle as it, in a way, re-dichotomises the “the West” and “the rest of us” in literary criticism. Edgar Wright rightly presents the poser as follows:

The first (question) is whether any general critical theory e.g., a mythopoeic or Freudian approach, can work when applied to a culture that is totally distinct in its origins from the one that supplied the source material for the theory (8).

For a ‘universalist’ like Adetugbo, a great work of literature should have an enduring appeal beyond its immediate culture. He posits that:

“Nigeria has a literature written in English rich and intricate enough to merit evaluation by the critical standards that have sustained good literature else where in the world. Cultural differences notwithstanding, the experience that good literature affords can be appreciated anywhere” (173).

Okpaku, however, thinks differently, and so do other “nationalists”. In his “Tradition, Culture and Criticism”, Okpaku contends that the evaluation of African literature by Western standard “is not only invalid”, it is also potentially dangerous to a development of African arts”. He argues that the criticism of African literature must be carried out “against the backgrounds of African culture”. He charges the critic,

therefore, to “draw upon the patterns of the African aesthetics” and “use African critical standards” (Wright, 4). In their sundry studies of African drama, the “nationalists” emphasise cultural elements and indices of African traditional theatre and their exhibition on the contemporary stage. The preferences of this school, in most cases, are works in which oral resources as model of modern drama find adroit and proficient usage. The works of Ogunba, Nwoga and Echeruo among others represent this tendency.

The “nationalist” arguments coming across with much suspicion of the hegemonic discourse and totalising attitudes of the West, find accentuation in the politics, aesthetics and ideology of Negritude. Negritude, championed by Aime Cassaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Leon Damas and David Diop is a response to the perceived need to emphasise the distinctness of the Blackman and his view, and to stand them apart from the European. As an aesthetic principle, negritudism tries to, through literature, dismiss the Hegelian prejudice that sees Africa as a land of darkness without history and culture. Negritude writers challenge the position of theorists of White racial superiority like Herr Adolf Hitler (who propounded the theory of Aryans racial superiority), Hegel, men of Ku Klux Klan in America and the ideologues of the Nationalist Party in the Old (pre 1990) South Africa.

Though Negritudism is never a prominent ideological choice of the Anglophone African countries, its commitment to the retrieval of Africa’s lost dignity, its inward looking disposition, its celebration of Africa and its cultural values, among

other tendencies are shared by Anglophone elites and intellectuals from whom writers and critics are drawn. Be that as it may, quite related to the “nationalist” and negritudist discourse is sociological criticism in its various forms, which has enjoyed a large, following to date. The examples include Irele, Izevbaye, Jeyifo, Amuta, Onoge and Bamidele among others. Taking drama as a resilient social artefact and dynamic cultural event which mirrors the development of the society, the sociological critical options inspire as diverse interests as the cultural aesthetics of Ogunba and Okpewho; the “decolonising” critical crusades of the “Bolekaja” trio of Chinweizu, Onyechekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike; the Marxist polemics of Jeyifo, Obafemi, Gbilekaa, Uji, Onoge, and Amuta.

More than any other theory, Marxism has impinged upon the academic study and critical assessment of Nigerian drama especially in the 70s and 80s. Out to challenge what they dismiss as “bourgeois” criticism, Marxist-critics draw inspirations from the revolutionary and nationalistic fervour of Friedrich Engels, Paulo Freire, Amilcar Cabral, Walter Rodney, Augusto Boal and Frantz Fanon. The abiding concern of this school of critics is the formation of a poetics, which revolves around Marx’s dialectical materialism as a mode of experiencing and representing Africa’s political history. Interestingly, Marxist criticism does not hide its political preferences and it concentrates in its analysis more on content. It sees literature as a social artefact, which is meaningful within its cultural context. Social life determines literary creation and this forms the fundamental assumption of dialectical materialism whose

historicity privileges economic factors and class relations above other social conditions manifest in the text.

Marxist critics insist that art should be enlisted in the radicalisation of the thought process of the masses in fighting the course of liberation, that is, in pursuing the inevitable deposition of capitalism by socialism under a workers' government. Biodun Jeyifo's *The Truthful Lie: Toward a Sociology of African Drama* and Chidi Amuta's *The Theory of African Literature*, Omafume Onoge's *The Sociology of Literature*, and Saint Gbilekaa's *Radical Theatre in Nigeria* are illuminating discourses on Marxist's theory of representation and response. Because art itself is seen as an outgrowth of class struggle, these critics argue for a class-conscious poetics of African drama. They recognise the potentials of the theatre as a tool for mobilising social consciousness toward the subversion of exploitative economic order and oppressive political system, and its re-constitution into a socialist democracy where individual whims are subordinated to collective will. Thus, they interrogate works of writers who are perceived as ideologically committed or texts of not so ideologically committed writers, but which yield themselves to Marxist sociological analysis.

Some critics of Marxist literary discourse have however, accused it of harbouring dictatorial tendencies because of its predilection for prescriptions. Some, like Ayi Kwei Armah, have dismissed it as "part of the neo-colonialist African vogue of worshipping westerns products" (Amuta, 59). Some also posit that the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s as a result of "perestroika" and

“glasnost” has rendered Marxism anachronistic, either as a political or as an aesthetic theory⁴.

The constant concern of Marxist aesthetics with politics, especially from the viewpoint of the oppressed and dispossessed, its advocacy of revolutionary change easily recommends it as apt analytic framework for a study like the present one. However, why Marxism is found inadequate for this study is not so much for its limitations stated above, but for limitations imposed on it by its normative insistence on the mediation of every literary experience through a class framework on the one hand, and its concentration on content in its analysis on the other. Although, Marxist aesthetics acknowledges the import of form, it is subordinated to the interplay of dynamic social forces, which a literary work is out to represent.

The political imperative of the 1990s demands an evaluative strategy that will transcend the polemics of class conflict. Such a strategy needs to be mindful of literature as a pluralism of discourse on the one hand and as confluence of societal forces on the other. What this means is that to come to terms with elusive concept of democracy in Nigeria as articulated in its literature, one needs to go beyond the restrictive schema of class analysis favoured in Marxist literary theory and criticism. It is necessary to adopt a theoretical perspective that will articulate the dynamic interaction of the gamut of societal forces, including the economic, cultural, political and religious in the theatre as well as outside it. It is appropriate that a political concept like democratisation that is defined by epistemological pluralism is

investigated through a critical method that foregrounds that plurality. Besides, theatrical techniques deserve greater emphasis in the critical study of Nigerian drama. Genre theory is attuned to such expectations and these reasons among others recommend it as an effectual tool of analysis in the study.

Besides, new study of Nigerian drama and polity needs to avoid the common limitations of previous works by extending the frontiers of the canon of the genre beyond familiar names like Soyinka, Rotimi, Osofisan, Clark, Sowande and Omotoso (for example, Gbilekaa, 1988). The discussion stands to be enriched if the canon include works of emergent dramatists like Esiaba Irobi, Taiwo Olorunfoba-Oju, Ahmed Yerima, Tess Onwueme, Chinyere Okafor, Stella Oyedepo, Akomaye Oko, Ben Tomoloju, Pedro Obaseki and others.

Apart from Marxism, Feminism and Post-colonialism are alluring theories. Through them, socio-political experiences that have been imaginatively constructed in literature have been analysed. Both reject the structuralist “scientification” of literary inquiry. Equally noticeable in the two theories is the element of oppositional discourse of Marxism, which privileges the “Other” (the oppressed and marginalised). The daring extension of frontiers of reality associated with modernism also finds accommodation in both theories.

Feminism in a broad sense is a twentieth century social and political theory which sees gender relations over the ages and from one society to the other, as basically characterised by inequality, subordination and oppression ranged against the

woman. In practice, feminism transcends the affirmation of support for women's equal legal and political rights with men as obtained in its origin in Victorian England. Rather, its twentieth century praxis especially from the late 1960s advocates for women at the centre of political participation, the margin of which they have hitherto been operating from [Kristeva (1996), Mosse (1993), Kolawole (1998)]. This has been the principal engagement of many fora over the years. One example is the fourth International Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China in August 1995.

In the realm of literature, feminism starts from the premise that the established canons of great works are male dominated. The theory provides for negation and demystification of existing socio-aesthetic configurations especially those conceived and executed from the viewpoint of patriarchy. It ostensibly benefits from the general climate of rebelliousness, innovation and change brought about by modernist aesthetics.

Feminism, like Marxism, is founded on a negation of prevailing mode of discourse. The difference, however, is that while the latter centres class and economic analysis and negates 'bourgeois' aesthetics; feminism favours gender analysis and subverts suspected patriarchal codes of representation. By aiming at boosting women's participation in governance, by calling attention to inequality and disparity among the sexes, by exposing social injustice arising out of sexual inequality and discrimination, feminism is a worthwhile paradigm in the investigation of the perpetual antagonism of the sexes. Sometimes, however, its arguments slip into patent "anti-sexist sexism". In

the process, larger issues of underdevelopment, oppression, injustice and other neo-colonial problems confronted by both sexes are undermined or overlooked.

Post-colonialism is inherently ambivalent a theory of discourse. This is because events in post-independence Africa hardly point to a cessation of the oppressive order of colonialism. As Peter Ekeh, a political theorist declares. "in many ways, indeed, the post-colonial era is a continuation of the colonial era, with one important difference. Overt political control has changed hands from alien bourgeois elements to the new forces of the African bourgeoisie (308). Thus, some political and literary theorists have described as inappropriate, the term "post-colonialism" since "post" implies a "departure" from or "after". Apart from this, the emphasis on the metropolis (Euro-America) or imperial centre against the margin or periphery (Third World) seems to place the blame of Africa's crisis of development squarely on the West. Its consequent revisionist historicity somehow jeopardises a proper apprehension of true barriers to emancipation. Osofisan in "Theatre and the Rites of 'Post-Negritude' Remembering" further reinforces this view. He contends that modern African writers are less concerned with how Europe of the old colonial Empire stagnates Africa. Rather, they are more pre-occupied with "inept and kleptocratic governments, brutal self-perpetuating dictatorship (military or civilian) and the unrelieved poverty and misery among a majority of our people, compared to the ostentatious opulence of a corrupt few" (3). In the broad charge of under-development, the primary culprits exposed in post-independence Nigerian literature are not the

whites, but “the black-white men”. These are corrupt and compromised post-independence leaders as well as the lethargic, sometimes cynical populace whom Ayi kwei Armah has aptly depicted in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Though the novel is set in Ghana in the sixties, the events and characters depicted are significantly true of Nigeria and Nigerians, then and now.

Post-colonialism is grounded in the two centuries of European slave trade (1650-1850) and about a century of imperialism (circa 1860-1960). It proffers insight into the imperial imagination, which is marked by industrial, military, cultural, moral and racial superiority of the coloniser in relation to the powelessness and inferiority of the colonised. It is rooted in the philosophical reflections of Friedrich Hegel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, Michael Foucault (especially the latter’s attempt to construct a conceptual link between textual practices and relations of power) and Edward Said⁵ among others.

Post-colonial theory refers to the colonised as the colonial ‘Other’, which according to Eleke Boehmer means, “that which is unfamiliar and extraneous to a dominant subjectivity, the opposite or negative against which an authority is defined” (21). Admittedly, post-colonial literary discourse is recommended by its identification with the broad efforts of the colonised (oppressed) societies to resist colonial domination and attain social transformation in the post-independence era. It is also useful as an interpretive framework because it sheds light on attempts by writers to

upturn and dismantle colonial representation, to query colonial superiority inscribed in colonial literature and to validate their own experience.

However, after three decades of failed dreams of transformation, attention of literary discourse needs to shift from the colonialists of imperial centres to internal colonialists of the margin. By the latter, we refer to post-independence leaders of African countries. The charity of literary disapprobation should start from home. And as subsequent textual analyses will demonstrate, modern Nigerian dramatists are unanimous in their acceptance of this thesis. The tenor of dramatic discourse in the plays is not so much of “how Europe under-develop Africa” as Walter Rodney is wont to say, or the “West and the rest of us” as Chinweizu posits. Rather, the emphasis in the articulation of social conflict is largely on “how Africans under-develop, stagnate and impoverish their own people”. To these dramatists, the task of the Nigerian artist is to assist in the process of mediating the crises of governance and sublimating the problems of democratisation. Their works, on a general note, provide a concrete platform for analysing political experience from the viewpoint of “black colonialists versus black subjects”. Within this framework, the “Centre” of discourse shifts somewhat from European metropolis to Africa. The West is consequently “marginal”. The writers are more concerned with the problems of mismanagement of the economy and the consequent acute poverty and violence. The theatrical milieu created in each work evokes feelings and tensions analogous to those experienced in material reality.

In view of this, it is imperative that the critical discourse of the plays should review its focus in harmony with their compositional tenor and texture. That requires a theoretical framework, which recognises the epistemological shift indicated above and it informs the adoption of generic analytic approach in the study of the democratic imperative as articulated on modern Nigerian stage. It should be borne in mind that post-independence realities are far more complex, contradictory and agitated than what any of gender or class analysis alone can describe. Beside, the occlusion of social experience and the author's "authority" on the one hand and the canonisation of the text by deconstructionism, post-structuralism and semiotics make them inadequate for the above challenges. In fact, they constitute more of theoretical problems to be solved than solutions to the crises of perception in contemporary aesthetics.

Therefore, the generic approach is adopted because it is capable of achieving an abiding harmony between textuality and sociality; text and performance; form and content. As a matter of fact, genre criticism is not a discreet practice insulated from political and social influences. It is much sensitive to the social obligation of art as well as its mechanism of composition. Besides, genre criticism accommodates the plurality and diversity of experiencing in literature. Essentially, it recognises formal constituents of dramatic discourse, historical considerations, literary antecedents and the smooth interaction between the "whole" of a play and its constituent "parts".

A Proemial Note on Genre Criticism

The business of interpretation and evaluation in generic criticism is conducted through the apprehension of the nature of the artwork as a “whole” and the relational principle(s) governing its constituent “parts”. Thus, there is an essential interest of the genre critic in subject, form, style, structure, setting, attitude, mood, origin, historical purpose and psychological motivation. This interest stems from a conception of aesthetic beauty as a product of a dialectical relationship between “whole” and “part”. As Allan Rodway remarks, since the whole (text) is the sum of its parts, one cannot know what sort of whole (genre) a work of art is, without an adequate knowledge of the meaning of the parts (94).

Genre analysis is interested in categories borne by tradition or convention, which the work creates, or within the context of which it is created. It registers certain formal expectations that guide readers’ approach to similar works and enables them to understand individual works on their own and as part of a literary collectivity. The nature of an artwork is partly determined by some notion of a class (whole) and individual (part). Each work is a unique, separate entity, yet belongs to larger category by virtue of its component and the manner of its artistic structuring. The critic’s primary task is to determine the kind of art that is being created before considering other elements, because it is around that central intent that such other elements are woven. R.S. Crane clearly presents the concerns of a genre critic in the following posers:

To what extent, and with what degree of artistic compulsion, any of the particular things the writer has done at various levels of his writing, down to the details of his imagery and language, can be seen to follow from the special requirements or opportunities which the kind of whole he is making presents to him (Stevens and Stewart, 22).

It can be gathered from the above that genre criticism is an approach that pays a closer attention to the text while it leaves its door open to signifying possibilities from beyond the text. The approach considers elements that are anterior and posterior to the text, in so far as those elements contribute to the realisation of the discursive object of the literary work. As such, it is a self-referential, intrinsic criticism, generating apparatuses of literary criticism from literature itself. But its inward-looking disposition does not preclude references to history, politics, society, culture and other realms of signification outside the purlieus of art. It proceeds from a recognition of intra-textual, inter-textual and extra-textual homology. It is in this sense for instance, that one can talk of Aristophanes' *The Birds* as a comedy, in the same class with *Lysistrata* and *The Frogs*, as a classical comedy and as a Greek drama. Genre criticism considers those structural, rhetorical and literary elements that relate the play to these categories.

From literary history, "genre", a French word from the Latin "genus"-meaning "type" or "kind" or "form"- was commonly used in renaissance criticism to refer to different types of themes in literature and art and the correct form by which such themes might be articulated. However, the foundation for this literary framework was

already laid in Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *The Art of Poetry* ('Epistle to the Pisos') during the classical period.

Rising up in defence of poetry against strictures of Plato in *The Republic*, Aristotle in *Poetics* argues that "mimesis", an imitation of reality, serves basic emotional and psychic functions. For instance, he finds tragedy to be useful to moral health as it is capable of purging humanity of pernicious emotions and energies that can disrupt psychosocial equilibrium. Aristotle's opening remarks provides a paradigm for genre theory, which has greatly influenced its renaissance and contemporary conception:

I propose to treat of poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each; to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whatever else falls within the same inquiry (31).

Aristotle begins his "kind" discussion by categorising poetry – a term that embraces tragedy, comedy and epic – into the medium (means of communication); the objects (situation or character imitated); the manner (story narrated or enacted). He posits that a consideration of these categories is germane in any attempt to determine the "kind" or "type" of literature as each category has its distinct, natural components. These components not only express the functionality of the literary kind, but also establish the work's forms and constitute a standard against which subsequent writings are measured.

In further demonstration of his thesis, Aristotle defines epic, comedy and tragedy but devotes much attention to the latter. He develops what would later become a poetic of tragedy for renaissance and neo-classical writers like William Shakespeare, Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe and George Lillo. While tragedy depicts misfortune of noble characters in order to stir pity and fear in the audience toward achieving a purgation of these emotions, comedy represents inferior beings whose actions arouse laughter without pain.

However, classical genre theory has been criticised for being “prescriptive”. This accusation is founded on Aristotle’s declaration that “every tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality - namely, plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, song” (36). Besides, it is also condemned for its principle of purity of genres. This demands that a non-mixture of the elements of tragedy with comedy or epic is to be observed. While epic and tragedy deal purely with affairs of statesmen, soldiers, gods and demi-gods, comedy concerns itself exclusively with the affairs of persons from the middle class. Farce and satire target the common people who willfully upset the conventional social order.

The above lapses are, however, avoided in the twentieth century genre theory and criticism. It is no longer fixity with rigid and dogmatic categories⁶. Rather, it is dynamic and flexible. It is also “descriptive” rather than “prescriptive”. Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature* express the matter poignantly in the following passages:

Classical theory is regulative and prescriptive... classical theory not only believes that genre differs from genre, in nature and in glory but also that they must be kept apart, not allowed to mix... this is the famous doctrine of purity of genre, of the 'genre tranche' (233-34).

Modern theory is clearly descriptive. It doesn't limit the number of possible kinds and doesn't prescribe rules to authors. It supposes that traditional kinds may be 'mixed' and produce a new kind (like tragicomedy). It sees that genres can be built up on the basis of inclusiveness or 'richness' as well as that of 'purity'.... Instead of emphasizing the distinction between kind and kind, it is interested ...in finding the common denominator of a kind, its shared literary devices and literary purpose (234-35).

It is also in the nature of post-Aristotelian genre theory to respond to aesthetic peculiarities of a people's literature, due to its natural flexibility. It is descriptive in the sense that it generates its typology from existing canons and recognises the interaction of formal elements to generate new mode different from conventional ones. Perhaps, it is in this sense that one can appreciate the multiplicity of modes like Restoration comedy, Gothic novel, Theatre of the Absurd, Kitchen sink drama, Civil War fiction, Negritude poetry, Cockroach Theatre, Augustan satire and Radical Theatre. According to Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics*, a genre "serves as a norm of expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text" (136). Each genre builds its own body of assumptions and techniques that guide the audience's expectation about the work, and show how the elements function within the text to establish its broader filiations.

Genre theory as a principle of order is not strange to the discourse of African literature. A number of critics have adopted it in their works. For instance, Ogunba in his study of modern drama of English expression in West Africa, identifies three categories of plays:

- (i) The Propagandist play which aims at demonstrating a political or cultural point of view.
- (ii) The Traditional play which mediates the contemporary social experience through traditional performance.
- (iii) The satirical play (81).

Olu Obafemi's "The Development of Nigerian Dramatic Literature" is also of relevance, even though it is written with one eye for literary history.

Adopting the theoretical paradigms of Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*, the essay classifies Nigerian literary drama into the Residual (indigenous art forms); the Dominant (literary drama of English expression); the Emergent (writings of 'young' generation of dramatists who adopt a dialectical materialist interpretation of national polity) (57).

Quite a lot has happened on the Nigerian stage several years after these categorizations, hence, a revision is in order. Apart from this, Ogunba and Obafemi's scope are not wide enough to support an in-depth analysis of formal properties of each category or individual works mentioned. Besides, both analyses are much preoccupied with the thematic, giving little attention to the constitutive properties of each identified 'type'. It is in this regard that Ademola Dasylyva's more recent classification is worthy of note. In *Dramatic Literature: A Critical Source Book*, Dasylyva divides the canons

of African dramatic literature into four thematic groups: culture plays, nationalist plays, rational plays and neo-rationalist plays. To some extent, the “neo-rationalist” category accords with ‘trado-epic’ construct, but the practice of this aesthetics goes beyond the theatre of Osofisan as implied by Dasylva when he asserts that “...to date, it seems to us that only Femi Osofisan, is the only African playwright in this category” (88).

Useful as Dasylva’s groupings are in their illumination of thematic preoccupations of African playwrights over the years, the concern with form in this thesis necessitates looking beyond these categories. This is due in part to the fact that they are largely inspired by a concern with the subject matter of the plays as evident in the explanation of each category. To wit, form, structure and other theatrical indices are secondary. There is an attempt to grapple with the issue of form, resulting in the identification of three broad formal categories namely: conventional African tragedy, conventional African comedy and Osofisan theatre. These are rather broad to do justice to the focus of the present study, hence the need for a classification that will, among other things, address the confluence or dichotomy of form and content within a more particular framework.

In the analyses of the selected texts, democratisation is taken as a political consideration that moulds artistic responses of writers. The “whole” here is context, which determines its own patterns of signification, structure, con-texture, trope and diction. It is also the central point and organising principle that govern the interaction

between conventional tools of the theatre like dialogue, costume, characterisation, scenery and music. Expectedly, a taxonomic centre is perceptibly designed for the plays toward which theatrical, literary, rhetorical and linguistic components radiate. Within the “whole”, four aesthetic paradigms or constructs are identified. These are the “devaluation”, the “trado-epic”, the “gynocentric” and the “heteroformic”.

Genre criticism is not without its own limitations. For example, the dynamic nature of drama may make it difficult to strictly delineate aesthetic experience into the identified generic categories. Sometimes, there are overlapping characteristics, motifs and patterns within a text and between texts, which problematise the genre option. Sometimes a text may contain elements not accounted for in the category. In another instance, a work may contain certain elements relevant to more than one group. However, the thesis is mindful of these problems and it concentrates on those elements that are significant and capable of enhancing readers’ perception of the works. As Stevens and Sterwart remind us, “the study of genre...pushes readers to see literary works differently and to become aware of important elements and meanings that might otherwise go unnoticed” (26).

The Devaluation Construct

Modern Nigerian drama is constantly set in confrontation against factors inhibiting the emergence of true democracy in post-independence era. One of those factors is the will to self-perpetuating autocracy that is characteristic of the ruling

elites since independence. Some dramatists adopt artistic strategies directed toward achieving a delegitimation of military dictatorship and devaluation of anti-democratic elements. These artistic strategies called "devaluation" crystallise in satire, a literary mode that censures vices and foibles through ridicule and contempt. This literary mode has been widely discussed in Hight (1972), Bloom and Bloom (1979), Euba (1989). From Soyinka's *Requiem for a Futurologist*, *From Zia with Love* and *The Beatification of Area Boy* to Osofisan's deliberate inversion of democratic prospects in *Midnight Hotel* and *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, the communicative tools of the theatre are deployed toward upending dictatorial political structure. Directly or by inference, the need to dismantle and replace this structure is articulated. Satire, therefore, provides an artistic platform that permits a deliberate presentation of contradiction or distortion of actuality so as to expose aberrations within it. The contradiction is amusing in its conscious fictiveness and artistic distancing. Yet, it is serious enough to elicit contempt because it is grounded in tangible reality.

The devaluation construct proceeds from denigration toward re-constitution or reformation. What that implies is that playwrights who adopt this artistic option believe that the first task in building democracy is to devalue the repressive predilection of both civilian and military rulers, using the literary and performance mechanism of satire. It is characteristic of this paradigm to incite amusement against what is unseemly. In doing this, the artist may draw the long bow, that is, present an

overblown picture of the ills so as to make them palpable to all. The artistic disfiguration, on the other hand, may produce a devalued picture of the target. Regardless of the option adopted, the target will earn less respect from the audience when they encounter the target than s/he used to command in the past (before that distortion). The consequent disfiguration forms the technical thrust of the devaluation construct. Succinctly put, the construct involves a deliberate deflation of the 'high and mighty' as in *A Play Of Giants* and *From Zia with Love* or a systematised magnification of the 'trivial and lowly' presented in *Midnight Hotel*. The two variants conjoin at a devaluated version of reality in a way that is amusing, critical and disgusting.

Essentially, plays in this category create a risqué caricature of military dictatorship and a specious civilian regime. The aim is to make the audience to decipher in the portrait, a familiar tendency to seek, attain and sustain power not by persuasion and consensus, as it is the practice in genuine democracy, but by sheer brute force or by electoral manipulation. To remedy the situation, people need to recover their democratic will. One way to achieve that recovery is to demystify the ruling elite. The literary devices of satire adopted fulfil this pragmatic demystifying mission.

In *A play of Giants* for instance, Soyinka creates a universe of monstrosity in which Africa's self-confessed tyrants are assembled, jointly caricatured and pilloried. The Bugaran [African] embassy becomes a Hobbesian jungle where life is ineluctably

nasty, brutish and short. That the “Giants” (mental dwarfs) and their hypocritical backers – the super powers and multi-national organisations like the United Nations – are consumed in violence at the end of the play is an instructive dramaturgical logic. The wheel has, therefore, turned full circle. The big ogre is now swallowing its creator.

The mocking tenor of discourse in *Midnight Hotel*, the incongruity and grotesquery of its characters, as well as the operatic form provide methods of devaluing absolutism. Beneath the exciting lyricism and broad humour of the play is a theatrical engagement with variables explaining failed attempts at democratisation in the country. Crass opportunism, greed and nepotism played out against the background of a civil rule in Lagos suburb hotel by Pastor Suuru, Honourable Awero, Headmaster Alatis and Mr. Asibong are some of these variables.

The devaluative text is constructed from a welter of theatrical devices channeled towards an artful disfiguration of the target[s]. Paradoxically it makes the unpleasant somewhat admirable through the use of irony, sarcasm burlesque, parody, the grotesque, hoax and inversion. The organisation of the devices in a text is attuned to satire’s style of “magnification” or ‘diminution” for the purpose of laughter and indignation. They facilitate the portrayal of a cruelly humorous universe where Kamini and other tyrants call the short (*A Play of Giants*); where Robbers in the guise of night watchmen parade themselves as societal saviours (*Aringindin and the*

Nightwatchmen); where governance means artful plundering of public treasury (*Midnight Hotel*).

Irony generally propels action, characterisation and plot and it sometimes manifest in the setting too. Irony shows the gap between the reality of the age and the stage as it facilitates a simultaneous duality of discourse in the play, the overt and the implied, which is the reality of autocracy and people's aspiration toward democratic rule. Perhaps, that is why the plays present as heroes (where there are), 'aheroic' characters, stripped naked of all reverence and awe that their callings might have naturally conferred on them. The characters maybe thinly veiled individuals, in which case, the attack is particularised. Otherwise, they may be stereotypes, which make the spectrum of the attack broad.

Aside from the formal constitutive properties of satire identified above, costume, make-up, histrionic of characters, décor, lighting, music and dance are all useful in the task of devaluation. Within dialogue in a play, linguistic and rhetorical techniques like metaphor, litotes, innuendoes, pun, paradox, repetition, proverbs, and apothegm among others are also directed toward the same goal. The foregoing exposition has provided an insight into the frame of textual analyses of two illustrative texts: Soyinka's *From Zia with Love* and Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*. The emphasis is on those dramaturgical and rhetorical devices that facilitate the accomplishment of the playwrights' objective of devaluation in a bid to impugn tyranny and the perversion of democratic ideals.

The Trado – epic Construct

The term 'trado-epic' does not refer to the poetry of heroic deeds in the classical sense. Rather, it is used to designate the fusion of the indices of traditional African communal performance (trado) with the conventions of Brechtian epic theatre (epic). It refers to the aesthetics of those plays whose responses to the quest for democracy are expressed through an almost inseparable combination of indigenous theatrical elements with artistic conventions similar to, or consciously generated from the conceptual permutations of classical epic by Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal.

Brecht borrowed epic theatre concept from Piscator – the Portuguese dramatist and theatre critic. The latter used the term to refer to plays that depart from Aristotelian theatrical principles. Boal further expounded on the genre in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. However, as Ola Rotimi has argued, most of the elements often ascribed to Brecht's epic theatre in contemporary African drama (especially literary drama) are palpable in indigenous African performances. Attempting a comparative analysis of the two theatrical traditions, Rotimi in "Much Ado About Brecht" cautions on how far these elements can be credited to foreign influence. In his words,

"most of the features which define epic theatre are not singularly of Brecht's genius, as they are being glibly made to appear in the African world. Rather, it is clear that those features had existed in our African theatre tradition, long before Brecht was born in 1898, let alone when he paired up with Erwin Piscator (in the early 1920s) to experiment with the ideas" (254).

Consequently, *trado-epic* construct in the thesis means an aggregation of those salient conceptual features of epic as defined by Brecht, and their similar manifestations in traditional African theatre.

The mission of *trado-epic* aesthetics is to convert the theatre into an arena of free debate, where Man's rational capacity is cultivated, and he is thereby led into a new awareness of his situation. Osofisan, one of the practitioners of this aesthetics observes in "Theatre and the Rites of 'Post-Negritude' Remembering" that the object of epic is "to turn the stage into a problematic space of ideological conflict, through which the audience can see itself mirrored, and possibly energized in its struggle with history" (9). The theatre is predicated on the principle of dialectical materialism, which affirms Man's potentials to change the society and the society's ability to shape or alter the fate of Man. Society conditions Man, just as Man's struggles and interactions plot the trajectory of social history. As a theatre of political engagement that achieves a measure of technical innovation and formal deviation, the *trado-epic* theatre confronts Man with the limitations of his social, economic and political conditions and impels him to embark on a clearly defined course, as it is set against what it calls "bourgeois" oppressive system. It is also founded on a violation of natural theatrical norms as it rejects Aristotelian codes of "mimesis". Of course, dramaturgical strategies of *trado-epic* are well attuned to the political engagement of Nigerian drama from the late 1970s to date, hence, their notable manifestation in the works of the

period in focus. Its *raison d'être* is to challenge in all ramifications, the undemocratic power configurations and the subsisting mode of their inscriptions in art forms.

In relevant plays, there is a democratisation of the theatrical space itself. This is done, ostensibly to project values of democracy like freedom of speech, unimpaired association, free exchange of ideas and popular participation in decision-making. In addition, actions and events are presented from a viewpoint of 'alienation' (*Verfremdungseffekt*). This implies an alteration in the audience's relationship to the stage, distancing them from the action so as to watch actively and critically, and participate in the debate initiated by the performance in and beyond the theatre [Willet (1964); Boal (1985); Brockett (1992); Benjamin (1996)]. To this end, anti-illusionistic devices like the absence of an organic plot structure, cause-effect arrangement of events, the preference for episodic rather than linear sequence of narration, the intertexture of narrative, acting and dialogue with screen projections, instructive inscription, placards, fragmentary scenery, flashback and play-within-the-play are prominent features of democratisation discourse in plays that explore this aesthetic choice. There is a conscious attempt to call attention to a play's existence as a mere illusion and an artificial creation.

Besides, music, song, dance, trance and other elements of traditional African theatre are integrated into the larger compositional structures and forms of the *trado-epic* construct. Though these may not be peculiar features of *trado-epic*, they constitute vital defining features as means to both pleasure and instruction.

One vital feature of this aesthetic construct is that multiple issues are thrown up for discussion in the plays, though with political change as the consistent centre. Consequently, the monofocality of Aristotelian drama necessarily gives way to a multiplicity of discourse so as to generate debate and illustrate the normative dynamism of the theatre on the one hand and the multi-sidedness of democracy as a political concept and praxis on the other. In a related sense, the inter-subjective, open-ended and inconclusive resolutions usually witnessed in the denouement of the plays show awareness by the playwrights of the mutable nature of democracy. Democracy is never a complete solution in itself, but a way of seeking solution to the myriad of socio-political and economic problems besetting modern societies. Democracy is always in a state of being achieved and its achievement is never completed. Cohen cogently makes the point when he remarks in *Democracy*: "One profound truth about democracy is that we never simply have it, or establish it, but continually realize it in action and live it" (36). Similar developmental theory of democracy is accentuated by Diamond in *Developing Democracy* when he contends that democracy is always a work in progress, "developing at different rates in different ways and forms, in different countries" (23). Rather than ending in a decisive and final resolution, the play is rounded off in a debate or an argument. The resolution of such a debate can go to either side, depending on the preference of spectators. At times the debate becomes so engrossing that the playgoers continue it outside the theatre and the resolution in that case illustrate unifying consensus and collective participation in communal affairs. By

implication, it depends on a spirited collaboration of the stage and the auditorium. *Jankariwo*, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* and *Awaiting Trouble* appropriately illustrate this dialogic experience.

Interestingly, though the plays conclude on an ‘inconclusive’ note, options for change are carefully advanced, in their bid to generate ameliorative prescriptions. For example Ben Tomoloju’s *Jankariwo* provides a glimpse of a new society purged of the greedy, individualistic, appropriative and hegemonising tendencies of the failed Second Republic. Atunda Olu (new creature of the divine) is the human icon of that socio-political engineering. In *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*, a repressive hegemonic order typified by old Iyeneri is combated and displaced by democratic forces coalesced under Yungba Yungba dance group. The youthful Ayoka is the plinth of that new dispensation.

The conflict in trado-epic plays is usually not between man and “more than man” or the supernatural as obtained in preceding pro-classical plays. It is rather between Man and his creations, or among mundane beings with definable presence. The plays essentially demonstrate a Cartesian humanistic vision in which man becomes the measure of all things.

In summary, for a proper grasp of the democratic imperative, it is necessary to consider the nature and contextual re-presentation of the foregoing artistic elements in relevant plays. That specifically is what the analyses of Osofisan’s *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* and Oloruntoba-Oju’s *Awaiting Trouble* in Chapter Four does.

The Gynocentric Construct

The gynocentric aesthetics seeks a new gender relationship on the stage as well as in the society. One of the prominent goals of its intervention in the discourse of democratisation is the creation of an alternative literary (and by extension, political) order that is fundamentally women centred. Plays in this category therefore, push women to a centre of power, the margin of which they have been operating from, either in pre-colonial, colonial or post-independence setting. Dramatists sympathetic to gynocentric aesthetics argue against socio-political arrangements that sustain the power hierarchy in favour of men. They are persuaded of the power of the theatre to either subvert or further entrench these arrangements.

Essentially, the gynocentric drama draws its aesthetic materials from the multiple nuances of feminism - a critical perspective that sees women as victims of discrimination and oppression. The point is clearly made by Julia Clive Mosse when she remarks that "From most, if not all societies, women are regarded as subordinate, and peripheral regardless of what they are doing, since what women do, by definition is unimportant" (24).

The playwrights in the specific case of Nigerian polity posit that governance in most parts of Africa is hitherto largely an exclusive preserve of men. Actually, colonialism, they contend, merely accentuated the patriarchal order while post-independence politics, rooted in the failings of colonialism as it were, has not done

much to reverse women's exclusion and subjugation. As noted in the UNDP 1998 *Human Development Report* on Nigeria, "the political conditions which have prevailed in Nigeria, particularly since independence, have militated against female empowerment. Military governments are usually male dominated and non-participatory, and Nigeria has been virtually continuously under military dictatorship since 1966.... Even though women are represented in the country's armed forces, they are generally in junior and middle non-combatant ranks" (5). Drama, like other fields of social discourse lends the woman (and her sympathisers) another voice to challenge her putative domination. Dramatists who share this vision pursue women empowerment by invalidating the 'man-ic' order whose claim to democracy is inherently undermined and challenged by the fact of women's under-representation or outright exclusion.

It was in the eighties when the need for democracy began to impart itself with stronger force and when the status of the woman was being re-defined worldwide that the woman became a cardinal focus in the democratic agenda. It began to appear to writers and audience with increasing clarity that an alternative part to dictatorship is better pursued through genuine participation of both sexes, without either suffering discrimination. Thus, the struggle for democratisation is in a sense, a struggle of women to gain increased access to economic and political power.

As it is in politics, the existing canons of Nigerian drama demonstrate gender imbalance as it is dominated by male writers whose works are accused by

“gynocentric aesthetes” of reinforcing age-long patriarchal ascendancy, whether in the conventional pro-classical tragedies of Rotimi and Clark or in the mythopoeic and satiric plays of Henshaw, Soyinka and Ogunyemi. Even in the genre popularly designated as “radical theatre” where political revolution is a given, the revolution, they contend, is executed largely from a masculinist viewpoint as seen in Bode Sowande’s *Flamingoes*, Rotimi’s *If...* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*, Kole Omotoso’s *Shadows in the Horizon* and Osofisan’s *Reel is the Freedom Road*.

The gynocentric construct, therefore, is a response to the foregoing developments re-presenting the woman in the crises of governance in Nigeria, enhancing her empowerment and participation. In view of this, the aesthetics provides an alternative political discourse in Nigerian theatre. Already decipherable in the plays is a counter-discourse, which present women as valorous and also activate their consciousness toward remedying the gender-inspired political imbalance. One index of artistic revisionism in such plays is the rejection of Aristotelian notion of heroism, which occludes the woman. Some gynocentric plays ostensibly de-centre men as heroes and privilege women. As heroes, such plays depict women who transcend patriarchal inhibitions to carve a niche for themselves and become outstanding. That is why Rotimi Johnson in *The Court of the Queens* celebrates as heroes, historical figures like Queen Amina of Zaria, Emotan of Benin, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti of Abeokuta and Angela Davies Of America, who all stand for revolutionary change.

perceived to be docile, dependent, voiceless and whose rights to participate in public affairs are naturally constrained.

It is around this gynocentric concern that formal theatrical elements like music, dance, costume, and scenery among others are deployed in the plays. Their use in articulating the democratic quest in Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* and Clark's *The Wives Revolt* form the focus of Chapter Five.

The Heteroformic Construct

The heteroformic⁸ construct designates styles of plays that are demonstrably receptive to artistic elements from a wide range of traditions, from classicism to post-modernism, from Western to indigenous theatre. Essentially, it is a montage of styles attuned to pluralism and collaboration, which are fundamental democratic ethos of the theatre.

The artistic beauty of concerned plays is predicated on how these disparate elements are aggregated into a whole; how the playwrights turn the fragments into a coherent system of meaning. The heteroformic construct is therefore, a pastiche of some sort as it appropriates many forms. It exemplifies and expands familiar possibilities in theatrical and literary techniques. To grasp the richness of this construct, the audience need to come to terms with the internal congruities of the diverse devices employed in the plays.

Besides, passivity, silence, absence, otherness and marginality which define womenfolk in existing canons are characteristically challenged as it is the case in Stella Oyedepo's *The Revolt of the Bumpy Chested*, Tess Onwueme's *The Reign Of Wazobia* and Chinyere Okafor's *The Lion and the Iroko*. They commonly present women who are imbued with a new awareness of their being, and who challenge the undemocratic nature of the status quo with a view to changing it. Examples are Wazobia and Omu in *The Reign of Wazobia*, Amali and Ada in *The Lion and the Iroko* and Koko, the voice of Erhuwaren women in *The Wives' Revolt*.

A gender sensitive approach to the democratic imperative is not undertaken solely by women dramatists. Some male dramatists in their work have demonstrated equal commitment to more equitable gender relations in the running of the Nigerian state. These include Rotimi Johnson in *The Court of the Queens*, Clark in *The Wives' Revolt*, and Pedro Obaseki in *Idia*⁷. The plays equally demystify the composite patriarchal culture and reject the putative passivity of the woman.

On the whole, the dramatists sometimes turn to history, legend, myth or contemporary happenings, to draw subjects. Sometimes, they re-create traditional political structures. However, all these derive their significance in relation to modern reality. Their dialogue give expression to what Julia Kristeva calls "the intra-subjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past" (474). In other words, the dialogue often challenge received stereotypical image of the woman,

It is arguable that this artistic category also has the tendency to break freely with known rules of traditional genres and construct new ones. Relevant plays attempt to ridicule excesses of ruling elites via laughter as to make them satire, yet they sometimes adopt the performative strategies associated with the trado-epic construct. Indeed, they contain elements of the three preceding paradigms and more. For instance, Irobi's *Nwokedi: A Play* presents the tragedy of Nwokedi Senior, a politician and Arikpo his colleague. Nwokedi, the former's son and his band of unemployed youths vengefully murder both politicians. The tragic ambience evoked in the play simultaneously recalls classical tragedy and its African variants. The murder of Nwokedi Snr. by his son recommends the play as a veritable illustration of Oedipal complex. Meanwhile, its orchestration of rage, disillusionment and despair expressed in a new art that is itself a dissolution of conventional generic expectation brings it close to the avant-gardist aesthetics of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*. As such, *Nwokedi* shows a synthesis of forms drawn from a wide range of traditions and tendencies to deliver a complex reading of the democratic struggle in Nigeria. But its inquiry into the political behaviour reveals a clear understanding of the forces that determine human disposition to power, that is, self-interest in the case of Nigerian politicians.

Ahmed Yerimá's *The Silent Gods* also illustrates this paradigm. As the label "heteroformic" suggests, the plays cohere the tragic and the comic, the pathetic and the laughable with the satiric in a manner that defies easy categorisation in a strict

sense into the common dramatic types. In Chapter Six, the diverse communicative elements of the construct are explored, using the works of two emergent talents on the Nigerian stage in the 80s and 90s. They are Irobi' *Nwokedi* and Yerima's *The Silent Gods*.

In summary, the thesis examines several theatrical responses generated by the elusive concept of democracy in the Nigerian experience. It expresses a preference for the genre theory as analytic framework among other options. The generic framework facilitates the updating of the canon of Nigerian drama and its critical study. It also facilitates the broadening of the canons to include simultaneously established and emerging writers. The approach recognises pluralism – a virtue of democracy - in its discourse. The four aesthetic constructs go a long way to signpost important formal as well as thematic trends in modern Nigerian drama⁹.

NOTES

1. Assertions about Nigerian drama are generally relevant to the African context and vice versa, hence, the two designations are often used interchangeably in the thesis.
2. "Text" here represents not only the printed materials, but also any artwork: play, novel, performance, sculpture, painting and music. However, its usage goes beyond the limitations imposed by New Critics, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and other Post-Saussurean aestheticians who free the text from its sociality. The text is a summation: a totality of historical, psychological and cultural details and it is within the context of these that the text derives its signification. Consequently, these details need to be considered alongside formal elements in the art of criticism.
3. The term deliberately puns on "autonomy". It is a fusion of "auto" (self, inward-looking, independent) with "nominal" (which means very much below the critical value of an object or a phenomenon). By insisting on self-sufficiency of the text, especially African text, the critic undermines the value of writing, which is basically structured by a particular experience.
4. For further critique of Marxist aesthetics in African literature, see Soyinka's "Who is Afraid of Eleshin Oba?" (110-33); "The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies" (279-314) in *Art Dialogue and Outrage*, Ibadan: New Horn, 1988. See also, Lanre Bamidele "Theatre and Ideology in Nigeria: An Alternative View" in Jide Malomo and Saint Gbilekaa, *Theatre and Politics in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Caltop Press, 1993, 150-58 and Bamidele L.O. *Sociology and Literature*, Ibadan: Stirling and Holding, 2000,
5. Said describes post-coloniality as "Orientalism". According to him, "Orientalism" is a body of knowledge on the basis of which Europe developed an image of the east to accompany its territorial accumulation... the way in

which European linguistic conventions and epistemologies underpinned the conception, management and control of colonial relationship” (Boehmer, 51).

6. Northrop Frye’s radical genre theory is quite influential and important. Frye identifies four literary “types” which he calls “Mythos”. His categories peculiarly show a homology between literary creations and natural seasons. For instance, comedy to him is inspired by the “Mythos” of spring while satire/irony are products of the “Mythos” of winter. However, these categories are oblivious of peculiarities of non-Western societies, apart from the fact that they are dated. Therefore, they cannot be considered as appropriate for the present investigation of the aesthetics of modern Nigerian drama.
7. “Idia” a historical play documenting the exploits of Queen Idia – Queen mother of Oba Esigie of Benin – was directed by the playwright and premiered in Lagos between 1st and 3rd May, 1998.
8. “Heteroformic” is derived from a combination of the prefix “hetero” (meaning ‘many’ or ‘different’) with “form” (which is the literary element that establishes a work of art’s literariness).
9. The interest of the thesis in form and style is not in the sense of separatist conception of art as evident in “art for art sake”, formalism and structuralism. These critical paradigms above are united in their outright negation of the didactic, the empirical and the historical from the purview of criticism.

CHAPTER THREE

THE TROPE OF DEVALUATION IN *MIDNIGHT HOTEL* AND *FROM ZIA WITH LOVE*

The devaluation aesthete selects for especial attention, the shortcomings of a person, type or group within the polity. He directs his sneer at the target and gradually extends it to embrace others with similar shortcomings (Highet, 241). As a mode of negotiating reality, it shows the transformation of men, situations and institutions to their aberrant form. The style is to depict characters worse than they are in real life by exaggerating their failings. The distortion is not only to shock the audience into a new awareness, but also to goad the society toward correction. This is because the target is literally shot down from an unmerited altitude of eminence where s/he has been elevated. The works of Aristophanes illustrate the above submission.

Aristophanes, the classical Greek comic poet deploys lampoon, invective, wit and lascivious humour in censuring the so-called, statesmen, philosophers, politicians, bureaucrats, writers and soldiers of his time. His old comedy draws much influence from the tradition of 'Komos' – a popular ritual observance associated with the cult of Dionysus. During the festival, participants don masks of different shapes representing horses, frogs and birds among other animal types. In their hilarious and irreverent disposition, they denounce improper behaviour of highly placed men (Hotchman, 253).

In *The Birds* for instance, Aristophanes lampoons Socrates, other sophists and their religious precepts. Socrates “thinkery” is presented as a mere enterprise of skill acquisition in facile rhetoric, trifling argument, evasion and blasphemy.

Through the Strepsiades philosophical academy, Socrates is presented as a “corrupter of youths”, hence, the setting ablaze of the school and the dispersal of Socrates and his students from the Academy.

The literary practice of demeaning wrong conducts of personalities also feature in the folk ballads fables and entertainment of itinerant entertainers and court Jesters in the Medieval Europe, especially England. The dramaturgy of Ben Jonson is also relevant. For instance, his satiric comedies parade characters whose disproportion of liquid called “humours” make them mere caricatures rather than temperamentally and morally whole individuals. They are often motivated by greed and implacable ambition. In *Volpone* or *The Fox*, Jonson adopts the devaluation mechanism to ridicule greed, avarice and gullibility in Jacobean England. He adopts animal designations for characters who manifest these ills to underscore their descent to the level of sub-humanity. Thus, Volpone, the protagonist is the fox while greedy seekers of his estate like Voltore (Vulture), Corbaccio (old Raven) and Mosca (fly) patronise him. Members of his household are human deformities like Nano (dwarf), Androgyno (hermaphrodite) and Castrone (eunuch).

Essentially, the devaluation aesthetics in Nigerian theatre is a mechanism through which writers pour scorn on prebendal democracy and military autocracy. To

achieve true democracy, it is contended that a sufficient understanding of the imperfections of the status quo is necessary. Satire is perceived by some dramatists to be a discursive strategy in the acquisition of informed awareness of the errors of the reigning order. Femi Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* features the civilian rule of second Republic and its democratic pretensions. The autocratic military regime that ousted the former earns the censure of Wole Soyinka's *From Zia with Love*. Both plays amidst the over-arching ridicule and contempt show the essential characters of politics in post-independence Nigeria as a sing-song between the widening of democratic space and the contraction of the same by the elite. Whether prebendal democracy or military autocracy, both plays present paradigms of what democracy is not and how not to run a democracy.

Midnight Hotel

Nigeria's historical materiality since independence has shown an inclination toward authoritarian rule and prebendal politics. Among the elites (civilians and military) who have taken turn to govern, quite observable is the tendency to appropriate for sectarian purposes, economic resources of the state, using political power at their disposal. Richard Joseph, who has contributed a great deal to the study of democratic theory and practice in Nigeria, aptly describes this type of politicking as "prebendalism". According to Joseph, prebendal patterns of political behaviour are anchored on the persuasion that "public offices should be competed for and then

utilized for the personal benefit of office holders as well as their reference or support group". Under this dispensation, he continues: " the public purpose of the office often becomes a secondary concern, however much that purpose might have been originally cited in its creation or during the periodic competition for it" (8).

Prebendalism foists a social relationship and political framework where it becomes fundamental that an individual would have to elicit support and protection of a "godfather" in his or her quest for basic social and material goods like loans, licences, plots of urban land, employment and promotion (56). To this list, we can add contracts and tax evasion. Expectedly, in such a polity, the normative functions of the state and its institutions are undermined. This is partly because office holders are wont to conduct official businesses not in accordance with a clearly defined and predictable pattern of rules. It is quite incompatible with democracy as it breeds corruption, arbitrariness and authoritarianism. It also does not support equality of citizens and transparency in governance.

The concept of prebendalism is linked to, and sustained by a patron-client social intercourse. Clientelism, as this is called has been defined by James Scott as a kind of social relationship "involving largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resource to provide protection or benefits or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services to the patron" (Joseph, 57). It is right, therefore, to observe that

Nigeria's post-independence governance has been largely characterised by tenets of prebendalism and clientelism.

Midnight Hotel is a one-act comic opera. Its key focus is the prebendal politics of Nigeria's Second Republic between October 1, 1979 and December 31, 1983. The play also depicts the patrimonial relationship between the state and the rest of the society, especially in terms of the control of economic power and in the distribution of public resources. The separating line between public and private funds in this socio-political framework is either too thin or simply non-existent.

As a matter of fact, by June 1982 when *Midnight Hotel* was first performed at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, the civilian regime of Alhaji Shehu Shagari had provided sufficient reasons for any perceptive observer of Nigerian politics to adjudge it as far from being the much-desired democracy. Less than two years to the expiration of its first term, transparency, accountability, sovereignty of people's will, and other guiding principles of democracy were still being hoped for.¹ The play is appropriately dedicated, in view of the foregoing, to the Second Republic and "its beneficiaries". Equally treated with disapproval in the play are religious leaders who share the prebendalistic notion of power and public administration held by politicians.

Corruption has been the bane of governance in Nigeria and it has considerably militated against the growth of democracy. Although the concept of corruption has defied precise definition, there seems to be an agreement among scholars about its incongruence with democratisation. C.J. Friedrich has once explained that a pattern of

corruption exists, “whenever a powerholder who is charged with doing certain things, i.e. who is a responsible functionary or officeholder, is by monetary or other rewards not legally provided for, induced to take actions which favor whoever provides the rewards and thereby does damage to the public and its interests” (74). It is arguable therefore, that corruption is a function of prebendal and patron-client socio-political formation in which public officials regard their offices as commercial enterprises through which they seek to maximise their gains, having invested to secure the office in the first place. Osofisan isolates this notion of governance for lampoon, showing that a renewed struggle for democratisation in future should be prefaced by or accompanied with a determined war against prebendalism and its appurtenances already mentioned above.

The story of *Midnight Hotel* is derived from *Hotel Paradiso* written in 1894 by Georges Feydeau, easily the most famous French comic dramatist after Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (Molière). Feydeau’s comedies, mostly one – act plays are concerned with domestic affairs of middle class, often characterised by infidelity and indiscretion. From *Armour et Piano* (Love and Piano) to *Tailleur Pour Dames* (A Gown for his Mistress), *Du Marriage au Divorce* (From Marriage to Divorce), *Le Dindon* (The Dupe), *L’affaire Edouard*. (The Edouard Affair) and *Monsieur chasse!* (Monsieur goes Hunting), Feydeau presents middle class women who put on a veneer of virtue, but are actually unfaithful to their husbands, yet they resent any slight suggestion of infidelity from their spouses. The hotel is a common setting in Feydeau’s dramaturgy,

servicing as a rendez-vous for illicit affair. An equally common feature is the creation of two characters who are brought together in a situation where they should not meet, without sparking off an unpleasant experience, like Boniface and Cot at the Hotel Paradiso.

When the “dinner of song and laughter” superintended by the Songmaster and his Petronaira band begins, Asibong Badmus Rufai arrives Midnight Hotel to spend the night. Asibong is of Easy-Con Associates, the architect and contractor who constructed the hotel. He is in the hotel to establish the veracity of its management’s claim that Ghosts are haunting one of the rooms. To him, the complaint might as well be an ostensible motive to evade an almost due rent. He is lodged in Room 7, the supposedly spooky room by chief Jimoh, the receptionist.

Coincidentally, Awero (Asibong’s wife) brings Pastor Kunle Suuru (Asibong’s friend) to the same Midnight Hotel to pass the night with him. Awero is requesting this service (bribe) from the pastor as the price to be paid if she is to use her influence as a member of the Building Committee of the House of Assembly, to secure for the pastor, his desperately sought contract. Although Pastor Suuru is hesitant and afraid of being discovered, Awero assures him of the hotel’s secrecy and safety. Ironically, her absolute certainty is juxtaposed with the reality of her husband’s presence in the hotel without her knowledge. Asibong too is unaware of their presence. Each time Awero makes love advances to Pastor Suuru; he recoils and retreats in a curious reversal of the typical male aggression/female submission hypothesis.

Awero's bid to consummate her mission of "sampling" Suuru's "goods" is also frustrated by a series of unintended interruptions in the form of chief Jimoh and Bicycle (hotel attendant) who intrude at awkward intervals to secure the attention of these "lovers" (traders, really). Also standing in the way is Suuru's emotional disarray and the presence in the hotel, of Headmaster Alatise with his three daughters. Later, the complex knott of the plot is disentangled as Asibong, Awero, Alatise and Suuru are brought together while the mistaken identity is revealed. The mutual suspicion of infidelity between Awero and Asibong is resolved. Suuru resigns himself to the uncertainty of his success in the contract bid and in the same way; Alatise gives up his suicide attempt. He is re-united with his daughters, now "disgorged" by the "monster" that 'gobbled' them up. They are actually violated by soldiers upstairs.

The restored harmony after disturbance inspires a "song of far away land" to celebrate the absurdity of the experience of the night. To the audience, it parallels the absurdity of the Nigerian polity during the Second Republic because it is such an era, as the song suggests, when:

The people have no peace
 The people have no rest
 For the robbers have come to power
 And the robbers are now in power
 The great looters of the public purse
 With all their lying and thieving
 They dance around in broad daylight...²

On the whole, at the heart of the plot is an intricately knitted web of coincidence (verbal, gestural and situational), premonition, suspense, mistaken

identity, parody, irony and discovery. Every now and then, there is a threat of turmoil. But somehow, sharp wit of characters and sometimes their inadvertent actions steer the course of the plot away from the precipice. At the end, tension is diffused, disaster averted and order restored. In spite of the restoration, quite palpable is the feeling of contempt and ridicule directed against those factors that make democracy a mirage in the country. These include greed, materialism, nepotism, corruption, arbitrariness, electoral fraud, violence and arson.

There is a pursuit of different strands of truth by the characters. These lines of truth, ordinarily, should not meet in order to avert unpalatable consequences and efforts are made to suppress the real truth. But occasionally, the truth threatens to unravel and the audience is consequently set on the edge of his/her seat. Shortly after, a lid is placed on the simmering cauldron of tension and harmony returns.

The manner of resolving the conflict in the play, which makes the guilty go unapprehended, is reminiscent of Soyinka's *Jero Plays*. Both *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphosis* end in the escape of the scoundrel. In the same vein, Pastor Suuru's veneer of piety remains intact in the estimation of other characters except, perhaps, Awero. Honourable Awero is still a dedicated Member of Parliament and a faithful wife. Her spirituelle and "fidelity" (to use Alatis's parlance) are yet unshaken. It is instructive that functionaries of the reigning order and citizens who watch the distasteful pictures of politicians and clerics in *Midnight Hotel* are likely to realise how far the democratic experiment contrasts with expectations in a genuine

democracy, for the parliament here is a bastion of prebendalism. Awefo is as despicable as the polity that produces her. The portrait could influence the electorate to vote out such political misfits at the next election or the erring leadership could retrace its steps, embrace democratic principles and win back people's confidence before the next round of elections, in order to renew its mandate. Herein lies the pedagogic value of the play's devaluation aesthetics, beyond its entertainment orientation, after all, to appreciate true democracy; one needs to understand the intricacies and practice of its aberrations.

Advertised as "a night of song and laughter", the play from the onset defines its mission in the introduction by the hotel manager as well as the welcome song of the Petronaira Band. For instance, the "Welcome to Midnight Hotel" address enlists the audience's interest by drawing an analogy between the origin of the hotel and Nigeria's political history, starting from the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates (by Lord Frederick Lugard) in 1914. The vices depicted in the hotel are familiar features of the Nigerian polity. According to the manager, the hotel was built in 1914 as a "house of sin" and had three rooms at its inception. This recalls the three regional structures of Nigeria – East, North and West – from the colonial period to independence. By the time of performance, the hotel has added another sixteen rooms to raise the number to nineteen i.e. nineteen states of the Federation. There is also an oblique reference to the legal disputation, which attended the 1979 presidential election that ushered in the civilian regime. The disagreement was over

the correct interpretation of the electoral statue as regards what constitutes 2/3 of 19 states.

To make a character proudly display his foibles is a sterling instrument of devaluation because such foibles and the quarters where they manifest are invariably ridiculed. Hence, the audience, through the address, is being prepared for a devaluation experience, judging from the hotel's mission statement as enunciated by its manager:

Our specialty is in those hidden games
 Which men indulge in, and nations sometimes.
 In fact, ever since we got our licence,
 And oil boomed into our independence,
 We've taken pains to fill our stores
 With every kind of corruption
 Moral or political,
 With all known forms of perversion.
 Yes, we've got them all,
 Without any exception,
 As long as it's something sordid and odious (MH, 1).

During the address, as it happens when other songs in the play are rendered, the stage and the auditorium are put in the dark. The pool of light is concentrated on the orchestra, which occupies an unobtrusive part of the auditorium. By this, its topical and lacerating lyrics are isolated for especial attention. Though not far from the stage, it is sufficiently apart to suggest that its musical intervention is a "separate dramatic experience". It is different from, but complementary to the flow of the dramatic discourse. In this case, it constantly intervenes to re-establish in the mind of the audience, the mimetic *raison d'être* of the play while sniggering at corruption.

Midnight Hotel is set in a low-standard hotel located in Lagos – the political and economic capital of Nigeria’s federation when the play was written. Lagos is a place where power is undoubtedly of immense profitability; hence, it is pursued and courted at different levels. Besides, the city is believed to be a repository of all imaginable and outlandish deeds. It is a city of limitless possibilities where all means are deployed into the pursuit of wealth, including the creditable and the reprehensible. Indeed, Ken Saro-Wiwa aptly depicts Lagos as a city enmeshed in corruption, inhabited by people who are ever driven by one obsession or the other, in his radio play - “The Transistor Radio”⁴. It is strategic, therefore, that the corruption of a putative democratic order is being dramatised in the locus of power (Lagos), more so, in a hotel that is well reputed to be a haven of corruption.

Unlike in the Feydeau’s model, all actions in *Midnight Hotel* take place in the hotel. Characters’ interactions occur between the Foyer, Rooms 7 and 6, and the stairs leading to the upper floor of the hotel where among other imaginary guests, the soldiers are accommodated.

The hotel is described as a “typical low class hotel in Lagos” (i) in the stage direction. It is a rendezvous of rogues, adulterous wives, unfaithful husbands and political profiteers among other types. Two sparsely furnished rooms are visible to the audience in a bid to create the impression of “extreme cheapness”. Its substandard quality calls attention to the moral inferiority of its patrons in spite of their eminent social standing. Admittedly, the modesty of the hotel is in accord with the normative

preference of satire for low, inferior and trifling affairs. However, an incongruity is immediately spotted here, with a clear motive of devaluation when one considers the social eminence of its listed patrons. They include: Asibong, a member of the business class, Pastor Suuru, a cleric, Alalise, an educationist, businessman and former gubernatorial candidate and Awero a Member of Parliament. Others will include persons not present on stage, but alluded to in the dialogue like the Governor of Donme state, the colleague of Awero in parliament who recommends the place (Midnight Hotel) to her, Alhaji J's youngest wife, the Obi of Echeta Amulia and Alhaji Teru. The hotel somewhat belies their status and that incongruity enables the writer to explore the duplicity inherent in their conduct.

Put differently, patronising Midnight Hotel by Suuru and Awero for instance amounts to an act of climbing down by the duo. This is in view of the moral infractions associated with the hotel and given the integrity that the public is wont to demand from the duo due to the offices they hold. According to Awero, the hotel is "hardly better than a brothel" (59). It parades all forms of perversions, "moral or political" (1). In Pastor Suuru's evaluation, it "looks horrible...like the devil's own den" (14). Yet, it holds some attraction to the characters, especially in terms of discretion and safety. Awero's assurance is reliable:

...The man who recommended this place, a colleague of mine on the committee, is a great expert in these things. He's so thoroughly rotten that you can take his word for it when it comes to finding the most shady corners in town. This place was top in his list (MH, 14- 15).

Beyond the incongruity however, the hotel is in step with shady and murky matters such as the one that brings Awero and Suuru there. The hotel's designation, "midnight", is symbolic, as midnight is a period associated with darkness, obscurity and secrecy. Truly enough, openness is far from the pursuit of the duo. Throwing overboard the principles of transparency and due process, which should guide the conduct of parliamentary business in a genuine democracy, Pastor Suuru is seeking an advantage over other competitors for contracts. Awero is obliging him provided the pastor satisfies her hedonistic and amorous desires (rather than public interests). In such a dispensation, much of parliamentary decisions is influenced by extraneous personal considerations and is predetermined in places other than the precinct of the assembly (e.g. Midnight Hotel). It is unfortunate that a crucial affair like contract award, which requires input of the parliament using a clearly stipulated procedure is being conducted, not in daylight, but at midnight in accordance with private terms. The temporal and spatial oddity inherently detracts from the propriety and value of decisions taken in respect of the matter later in parliament. Night in African societies, apart from being a period of rest, is usually associated with something sinister and provides cover for people of ill motive. If government business is so shrouded in secrecy, it is prone to perversion, as witnessed in the play.

Interestingly, Osofisan explores the light/darkness inter-relationship in the construction of rooms 6 and 7. The bulk of the actions take place in these rooms and

visible lodgers occupy them. Though the conditions of habitation in them are generally poor, the light/darkness correlative is decipherable. There is no light in Room 7 due to its faulty electric switch. According to Bicycle, the fault has been unattended to for quite some time. It is permanently dark at night, except when illuminated by candle.

Its permanent darkness at night is sufficient to inspire hallucination or uncanny shapes suggestive of ghosts in the mind of a wary guest. An unilluminated room is a breeding ground for ghosts in the imagination of the superstitious. It is probable, that those guests who allegedly die in Room 7 are scared by darkness, experience shock and thereafter die of heart failure. Essentially the claim of ghost is a vital theatrical motive to bring Awero's husband to the hotel in order to further complicate the plot and generate tension.

However, it raises a problem. Given the African setting of the play, it is doubtful if the actual presence or suspicion of the presence of ghosts in a building will be as a result of an empirical reason like a defect in the architectural design and construction of such a building. It follows that that will not be a matter for a contractor or an architect like Asibong. A "Babalawo", an "Alfa" or a Christian Prophet is more likely to be summoned. Therefore, the excuse of ghosts is a tenuous, if not inappropriate reason to secure Asibong's presence in the hotel. The idea of ghost contributes to the super-real, weird, fantastic and shocking aura of the play. Certain excesses credited to politicians of the Second Republic are as weird and fantastic as ghost stories and fairy lore.

In a way, the dysfunctional light switch in Room 7 shows the dysfunctional nature of the Nigerian state. Once the level of control is faulty, darkness is experienced. Yet the manager of the hotel instead of attending to the fault prefers to “collect the cash and ride his Mercedes” (6). This is critical of the neglect, misplaced priority and ostentation that characterize governance in Nigeria especially after the famous oil boom. It is necessary to dwell a bit more on the structural relation of the rooms to extract artistic statements made by Osofisan through setting. Room 7 has four beds. Impliedly, it accommodates more visitors than Room 6, which has only one bed. Room 7 is actually used to accommodate the dispossessed like the headmaster Alatise and his three daughters – Catherine, Agnes and Bose. Room 6 is opposite Room 7, with a slightly better living condition. It has only one bed, with working light. There, Awero the woman of power is lodged with her client – Pastor. The proximity of the rooms reinforces the irony that runs through the fabric of the play. Unknown to characters, but known to the audience, is the presence of closely related people in the rooms, who are ignorant of each other’s presence or the real purpose of their presence. An artificial wall is created which sometimes separate the rooms and sometimes obliterate the distance. Characters in both rooms talk at cross-purposes or act with parallel intentions. The wall is finally removed at the end, but while it lasts, the sensual barrier makes the husband to be ignorant of his wife’s presence and vice versa. It makes a friend to be unaware of his friend’s presence in the next room. Yet, the barrier is so frail that the characters often unwittingly penetrate it. For instance:

SUURU ... (at this point, ASIBONG, coming out from the toilet into his room with a candle, sneezes. Pastor shouts 'bless you.')

ASIBONG (shouting back as he picks something, and returns to toilet). Thank you.

SUURU Don't mention it. Poor fellow (crosses himself) Jah (MH, 15).

The darkness in Room 7 implies gloom. Hence, it is congruent with the feeling of despair by Alatise who has not only suffered an electoral defeat, but also experienced persecution from the party in power. Room 6, with light accommodates electoral success and power that it brings. There, we find Awero who succeeds at the polls and is now a member of the ruling elite. Thus, the material loss and political dispossession of Room 7 contrast with the material success, power and influence of the opposite room. However, Room 6 is not offered as being perfect. For instance, its door is never locked; hence the constant intrusion of Jimoh, Bicycle and later Asibong. It does not provide Awero and Suuru the needed privacy and pleasure. Besides, it is a place where abuse of office, greed and infidelity are acted out.

Having established the imperfect conditions in the two rooms, the characters are brought together at the foyer where the final reconciliation is effected. Their inadequacies are to set in the mind of the audience the desire for a new order founded on departures from the dramatised political and moral anomalies. Beyond the visible ground floor, the foyer, the receptionist and the orchestra, the stairs that lead presumably to the upper floor stress the queerness of the plays general atmosphere.

Though its existence is to be imagined by the audience, the upper floor exceeds the ground floor in grotesquery and absurdity, especially in terms of corruption and wanton disrespect for human rights. Bicycle registers this reality from the beginning when he tumbles down the stairs, petrified by his strange encounter with a woman who is "as naked as *kere* fish" (3). At the end, the horror of Headmaster's suicide bid upstairs sends him crashing down the stairs again for relief. Thus, the upper level parades more absurd and distasteful deeds than what the audience encounter at the ground floor.

Of greater political significance is the fact that soldiers who are on vacation and are in the hotel to spend a week are accommodated upstairs. The soldiers, having relinquished power are actually on vacation from governance and are well placed apart from civil politics (downstairs). However, though out of power, they are still within ear-shot and their ever presence makes it easy for them to step back to power at the slightest suspicion of breakdown in law and order. The soldiers here conduct themselves in a recusant manner that makes them repulsive. They are simply obstreperous, as they sing and laugh to disturb others and send obscenities downstairs indiscriminately. They somewhat see themselves living above the society and superior to its mores.

The soldiers violate Alatisé's three daughters using financial inducement. They are indeed the 'monsters' that allegedly devour the girls and impel Alatisé toward suicide.

So, if he loses his election, his deposit and property to civilians, soldiers are capable of extracting more sacrifice from him. This implies in essence that the so-called democratic order has lurking around it, well-founded traits of autocracy.

Besides, there is an indication that what comes from upper floor, the military's quarters, is hardly a palatable alternative to the error of democracy or civil rule (downstairs). What goes on there defies dialogue and it can only be dealt with through equal force. Hence, Chief Jimoh has to flaunt his military experience in Congo as a member of the Nigerian troops in the United Nation Peace Keeping Operation during the Congo crises in early sixties, in order to deal with these rambunctious soldiers. Consequently, this scenic framework shows that solutions to the crisis of development in modern Africa should be sought beyond the top-down absolutist imposition of the military.

As the plinth of the play's gibes, Awero's character is quite worthy of attention. She is Marcelle in the original text. Awero is an MP who attempts to use public office to pursue private ends. Her prebendal predilection, succinctly put, is a major driving force for the play's conflict. She is apparently an embodiment of those shortcomings located in the National Assembly in the Second Republic. Her distorted and exaggerated mannerism notwithstanding, Awero is made to pursue Suuru in order to show her desperation; instead of being wooed by the man.⁵ The import of this configuration transcends its overt reversal of sexual roles. True, Awero's aggression and confidence are pitched against Suuru's timidity and hesitation, but that should

rather not be seen as a categorical victory for the woman. Instead, it underscores the intra-elite contest for power and privileges in a polity founded on clientage and economic inequality. Here, power is implacably pursued because of its immense political, social and economic benefits. As a result, Awero and Suuru, like the elite they represent are ready to stake their integrity in the mutual quest for private interests.

Awero typifies the misdeeds of the parliament. The legislature is supposed to be the soul of democracy. It is the barometre through which democratic values like people's sovereignty and popular participation are measured. It is the custodian of the legitimacy and constitutionality of a democratic dispensation, as it makes law for the state. Through the parliament, a pact exists between that state and its citizen, between the government and the governed, with each party having a definite set of obligations. It is also to act as a check against the excesses of the executive and the judiciary under a constitutionally supported tenet of checks and balances. But when and where the parliament is corrupt as depicted in *Midnight Hotel* (as it was indeed in the second Republic), then, the idea of democracy is in jeopardy⁶. Awero and the parliament to which she belongs are travesties of our expectations in a genuine democracy. In Awero's parliament, for instance, money, rather than rhetorical persuasion with objective facts and dialogue, is the key instrument of lobby (43). The reigning parliamentary ethos is hinged on a patron-client relationship in which lawmakers' materialistic motivations are barely concealed as the excerpt below graphically illustrates:

- AWERO: You're afraid because I've brought you here. Isn't it? You're so naïve that I wonder why I am even helping you. How do you think contracts are awarded? By prayer, isn't it?
- SUURU: I'm not saying that.....
- AWERO: I'm giving you a big chance by bringing you here.
As the only female member of the building 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.
- SUURU: Well...you know, Honourable, it's just that, that...
- AWERO: For Christ's sake, what's wrong with you? I'm telling you it's regular practice in parliament. All the male MPs are doing it, even to their own 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. They call it 'sampling the goods'. So why should I be different? (MH, 12-13).

Painted above is a demeaning portrait of legislative business. It is generally commercial in nature. In that wise, the parliament is a trading centre or an arena of "libre exchange " complete with goods, sellers, prices, buyers and haggling. It has its own discernible principles of contract attended with offer, consideration and acceptance. Hence, it falls short in this devaluated form of an institutional support for democracy or as a supreme law-making assembly in a representative government. Another example is appropriate here:

AWERO: Depending on you, your company
can bag ten, fifteen contracts in a week! Our

Committee has far-ranging powers over
 contracts from Aladja to Ajaokuta, to Warri,
 to Apapa, you name it! All those places
 where we're carrying out our Grey Revolution

(MH, 19-20).

Being chaffed in the above dialogue are what turned out to be 'white elephant' projects embarked upon by the Shagari administration, like the Iron Steel Companies in Ajaokuta, Aladja and Warri, and Green Revolution. These projects were aimed at achieving self-reliance in technology and food production. But they turned out to be avenues for dispensing largesse to members and supporters of the ruling party, National party of Nigeria (NPN) with little consideration for public interest⁷

Awero's "song in praise of sampling the goods" further drives home the absurdity in the so-called democratic political order. Election into the parliament is an investment made by candidates during campaign. The present infraction, is therefore, rationalised by Awero as a necessary act of recouping:

We made our investment
 When we came to campaign.
 So there's no need to bargain
 About our reimbursement (MH, 14)

Awero's constant reference to 'parliament' in her speeches is a device by Osofisan to accentuate a demeaning notion of the institution. She punctuates her speeches with the phrase "in parliament" more than a dozen times. In each instance, it is to proudly erect the parliament as a model of decorum, proper behaviour, gentility, good breeding, efficiency and sensitivity. But judging from its conduct as enumerated by Awero, it is sooner realised that it falls below such estimation.

AWERO: (exploding) NO! This is too much. You goat! You imbecile! You unmentionable disease! This will have to be debated in parliament. You will be jailed for ever. Get out. Get out! (MH, 23).

This verbal hostility is coming from an MP who is expected to be civil in her ways. She has earlier set herself as a model of refinement when she protests what she describes as "the appalling state of our language" owing to Jimoh's alleged indecorous use of language, and upon which she hopes to move a motion at the next parliamentary sitting (12).

Present here is a constituent of the comic, which Bergson describes as "inversion" or an "upside – down world" (743). Through inversion in which the guilty is pontificating about decorum, Osofisan hits at the appalling nature of the parliament itself and the democracy it is supposed to serve as a bulwark. One wonders whether what obtains is tyranny or democracy, when she later threatens Pastor Suuru:

"I am an M.P. remember, I hold power even over your life. One simple bill in parliament – (MH, 47).

Through Awero's exhibited vices, the playwright reaches out to the larger public sphere and ridicules the type she represents - practitioners of prebendal (and consequently undemocratic) politics in the second Republic. She is indeed the "Lagos woman" whose thriving ostentation is secretly facilitated by "a little" escapade at the Midnight Hotel, where the fruits of the oil boom goes (5). She extricates herself from trouble at the end. When it is almost sure that her infidelity will be revealed to Asibong, she turns the table of accusation of indiscretion against her husband. Though she goes off unscathed, she still demonstrates those frailties that the playwright would want avoided in a genuinely democratic polity.

One person who shares Awero's disposition to life is Pastor Kunle Suuru. He is a pastor; yet, he is in business (59). Although his name "Suuru" in Yoruba means patience, he is one of those clerics who are not content to lay their treasures in heaven in accordance with biblical injunction⁸ but here on earth. For someone who has overseas bank accounts, it is not out of place to attempt to get the better of the two worlds. He shares the Machiavellian principle of "the end justifies the means" which is more or less the guiding philosophy of the reigning "democratic" order. But he is also incongruous as he smokes cigarette, drinks wine and brandy, tells lies, bears false witness and sets to commit adultery all in a desperate bid to secure favoured treatment from the contract committee of the parliament. Clearly, Pastor Suuru does not want to be excluded from the on-going competition for the famous "national cake".

The pastor is notably depicted as a sham. The audience is presented with factitious exterior reality, which is inharmonious with what he ought to be, going by the substance of his calling. The gap between reality and pretention, projected through the matrices of incongruity is aimed at demystifying Suuru and other self-seeking clerics who abet excesses of politicians rather than serving as moral curb.

In a related vein, Pastor Suuru's quest for contract and his seemingly scrupulous hesitation to embrace Avero's tender buttress his ambivalence as a satiric type. He walks in "the valley of sin", yet he wants to retain his veneer of piety. A situation is depicted here, reminiscent of the biblical tempting scene⁹. Avero through her persuasion and insistence recalls the biblical tempter and his medieval literary recreations like the seven Deadly sins¹⁰, Lucifer and Mephistopheles. (These characters feature in the medieval morality play – *Every man* and in *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by the Elizabethan playwright, Christopher Marlowe). Pastor Suuru, the recipient of Avero's temptation is supposed to be the Christ figure, warding off the onslaught of "devil". But there is a wide gulf between Suuru and the Christ figure. He is a curious inversion of the Christ archetype whose palpable contradiction elicits contempt in the audience and also in Avero his "Tempter". Hence, the latter's exposition of Suuru for what he truly is:

...I'm tired of pursuing you about the place!...

All this stupid retreating and retreating as if you are not a prostitute like the rest. Yes, Pastor. A political Prostitute... That's what you are (MH, 20).

Interesting, Suuru manifests an inadvertent inflexibility or “mechanical rigidity” to use Bergson’s phrase in his theory of laughter, earlier referred to. To manifest mechanical rigidity by a character is to inflexibly pursue a course of action when he needs to bend a bit. An impression is given, of a transformation of that character into a “machine” or “thing” (743), thus, making him odd and laughable. We perceive such an inexorable stiffness in Suuru’s pursuit of contract. But the laughter he generates is that of indignation rather than pure mirth.

AWERO: But if you die here...
 SUURU: Not yet, God help me. I must win that contract first.
 Through the thickest forest. I’ll find a way (MH, 26).

It is significant for ridicule that he has to hang on to his desire, even when he appears dying. It is also significant to note that in his moment of emotional instability, he stutters and commits Freudian slips. Though he immediately corrects himself to hide his true intent, the playwright makes the pretence easily penetrable. For instance, he confuses “love” with “business”.

SUURU ...in business...er, sorry. I mean, in love. Awero, all sacrifices are nothing – (MH, 22).

His actual state of mind is still decipherable despite the attempt to conceal it. That is, he desires the contract (business) more than Awero (love). It is arguable from the foregoing that the slip merely re-affirms his persona as an impostor, and like a dissembler, he is enamoured of allusion to the *Bible* and the gamut of Christian

epistemology. His calling of “Jah” at every moment of exasperation is to expose further the disparity between his reflected image and the ideal. He is the lord’s “erring sheep” (12) in “the devil’s own den” (14). When his hope for contract dims, he resolves to “continue to walk with the cross on his back” (24), bidding his accounts in Switzerland bye-bye. He is also “the lord’s shepherd”, used by the devil (58). It is consequently not out of place that he lies to Asibong and Alatisé about his mission in the hotel with Awero, when their escapade is about to be unsealed.

In his subversion of our expectation in a clergy, pastor Suuru is preceded in Nigerian drama by impostors like Soyinka’s brother Jeroboam, in *The Jero Plays*, Evangelist Jeremiah in Sony Oti’s *Evangelist Jeremiah* and pastor Nebuchadnezzah Ifagbemi in Osofisan’s *Who’s Afraid of Solarin?* However, Suuru is more sentimental than Brother Jeroboam. In fact, he lacks the brazen wit and heartiness of Jero, but he shares the grotesquery and outlandishness of Evangelist Jeremiah and Nebuchadnezzah. Notably, Suuru’s offence is concealed from the would-have-been assailant, Asibong, unlike the case of Brother Jero whose false piety is eventually unmasked by Chume. However, both of them escape unharmed. If at all there is any harm that Suuru suffers, he is crest-fallen merely because he has lost his huge investment in the “Grey Revolution”. The contract remains elusive and his chance of recouping his bills on food, drinks, cigarette and accommodation at Midnight Hotel sounds remote.

Jerome Paulinus Alatise, the Headmaster, is a victim of electoral fraud and political persecution. He loses the gubernatorial seat of his province, which he contests for on the platform of Nigeria for Paradise Party (NFPP) ¹¹. Election that is ordinarily a democratic weapon of recruiting leadership is not what it is supposed to be. In the universe of *Midnight Hotel*, it is a “war” which is coming fast like a huge conflagration” (2). Political parties, which are like armies and whose orientation is the domination of the losers by the victorious, fight this war.

As a loser, Alatise stands in contradistinction to Avero who belongs to the mainstream of the new order. Through the character of Alatise, Osofisan attempts a characterisation of politics in post-independence Africa. In a genuine democracy, the opposition is as important as the winning party in power. But in this case, the opponent is perceived as an ‘enemy’, hence, its treatment with intolerance, contempt and exclusion. The ruling party as it is often the case in contemporary African politics tries to alter the balance of power holistically in its own favour. It attempts to eliminate the opposition through piece-meal incorporation, inducement, coercion or outright repression. Alatise and the NFPP are victims of this undemocratic practice. According to Alatise:

...since the new government came in, it's been hell for me. They took over my school and my land, and here I am. Jobless, homeless, and hungry.... it's as bad as that, I even lost my deposit, as the songmaster will bear witness (MH, 34).

He loses the election, due to rigging. Rigging of course is a devaluation of the democratic process, as it can lead to the emergence in power of an unpopular regime with dubious or even disputed legitimacy. The election, as Alatise describes it, in the "Song of the Lost Deposit" is like a "gambling house" (34), where people stake what they cherish best. While many contestants stake their greed and win, he invests his dream and he loses. His loss in the election is a negative advertisement for the republic. A democratic experiment founded on a shaky ground of manipulated elections and extorted mandate through rigging and violence is fraught with crisis, as the aftermath of 1983 general elections in Nigeria, for instance, confirms.

Furthermore, as a senescent politician, Alatise is remarkable for his peculiar rhetorical style. As the saying goes, "the style is the man." Proverbs, saws, idioms and epigrams drawn from Yoruba and English cultural background constitute the staple of his oratorical power as a politician. Apart from quoting European writers and philosophers or using strings of polysyllabic words, proverbs and idioms are vital communicative weapon of the Nigerian politician and Alatise has a remarkable reservoir of these. But peculiarly, they are either platitudinous in nature or defectively rendered through malapropism. Perhaps, they proceed from his emotional disturbance as a result of his electoral defeat and subsequent persecution. More important however, the faulty proverbs are comic elements in the play, which through laughter, point to larger imperfections in the national polity. Alatise's wise sayings in their

defects remind one of Lawuwo's proverbs at the denouement of the pro-workers struggle play in Yoruba – *Rere Run*¹² by Oladejo Okediji.

Alatise usually introduces or ends his wise saying with “*Eti roo*” (“ears listen” or “let me have your attention”). It prepares the audience for profundity which proverbs are known for. In the text, italics, showing that the phrase is an indicator or a signal item for something, which merits special attention, distinguish “*Eti roo*”. It is expected that something unique and profound is being said, but sometimes through their wrong construction or inappropriateness, we are let down in line with the overriding spirit of the play¹³. Naturally, devaluation aesthetics is founded on a feeling of being let down. Perhaps, only Chief Jimoh and Bicycle can rival Alatise in their potentials to excite mirth of indignation.

Chief Oladojutiwon Jimoh, the Asiwaju Atunbeedise of Ifetedo is the hotel's receptionist. Bicycle, the ever-boisterous factotum is his assistant. The satire is well animated by these minor but important characters.

Like other elite characters, Jimoh is driven by some obsession; his over-valuation of chieftaincy title. His frequent insistence on being correctly addressed as a chief is close to Awero who seizes every opportunity to proclaim her membership of the parliament. In a way, Osofisan ridicules the elite's craving for traditional titles, professional laurels and religious honour. The strong desire for traditional chieftaincy titles by bureaucrats and politicians is a function of the ascendancy of patrimonialism in national polity. As Joseph explains, office holders in a prebendalised state affect a

patrimonial stance (65). This stance is strengthened by traditional honorary titles because they confer a measure of respectability on the holders. Unfortunately, some of the titles are conferred as inducement for favour on public officials as Jimoh illustrates here when he agrees to run errand for Awero in anticipation of "Emirship" in Kano. Osofisan ridicules the foible through parody, bordering upon the mock-heroic.

The practised ease with which Chief Jimoh produces as evidence, a paid advertisement in a newspaper celebrating his installation, the unsolicited narration of the story of his installation to whoever cares to listen and his naïve acceptance of Awero's promise that she would make him a chief in Kano if he runs errand for her are all vital links in the overall devaluative scheme. However, more absurd and outlandish is his interpretation of Awero's promise to mean that he will be installed as an "Emir" in Kano. It is observed that Chief Jimoh is depicted as corrupt or prone to corruption like Awero provided the term is right, because he accepts to run errand for Awero when she promises him a chieftaincy title, in spite of the fact that it is Bicycle's schedule of duty to run errands.

Bicycle also shows an inclination toward bribery. He has correctly informed Alalise that the hotel has no vacant room for the night. However, when Alalise offers him money, he remembers Room 7, and allocates the uncanny room to the man and his daughters. With the inducement, a coincidence is achieved; Asibong, Alalise and his daughters are lodged in the same room. However, this coincidence shows inefficiency in the administration of the hotel, and indeed the nation that the hotel

represents. The inefficiency arises partly from a breach of order motivated by monetary inducement, which is a common phenomenon in the polity.

Generally, each of the characters is driven by one obsession which features in his/her action and verbal habits. For Chief Jimoh, it is chieftaincy title, stemming perhaps out of a complex of inferiority. The same thing with Awero who is obviously thrilled with political power and influence associated with her status as an MP. To Suuru, it is wealth, which state prebends like contracts can effectively and promptly facilitate. But he still wants to retain his claim to piety even when the two seem to be mutually exclusive. Alatise is obsessed with the unfortunate outcome of electioneering. Asibong is in quest of ghosts whose existence he denies initially. Interestingly, he holds both disbelief and belief in ghosts with much certainty. As the audience is aware, no ghost exists, but the conviction with which he raises alarm and flies in terror when he beholds Bose, Agnes and Catherine singing in the room makes him laughable.

To buttress these obsessions and their thematic implications, repetition is used as a cardinal rhetorical element in the play's discourse. Apart from stressing the dissonance between the political system in operation and democratic ideals, repetition reinforces the clarity of the play's devaluative framework.

Repetition, whether verbal or gestural, is explored in the idiolect of each character to register his or her obsession or overriding frailty as already highlighted above. It is also employed as a means of showing how the supposedly democratic

government in the play is at variance with the normal and the expected. For instance, one important objective of *Midnight Hotel* is to “expose” the limitations of prebendal political framework that passes for democracy. Consequently, the idea of “naked” is repeated and emphasised from the beginning as evident in linguistic and theatrical import of this excerpt:

BICYCLE: I tell you sah Jimoh, de woman, she was
 ...she was nakedly naked (emphasis added).
 JIMOH: And so? Were we not all born naked? ---

Ha ha. Look here, Bicycle. how many times will I remind you that you are no longer in your village? This is Lagos, man, and in Lagos, sex is business. Naked women, half-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

(MH, 3-4).

In the above, a recurrence of two concepts – sex (naked) and money is noticeable. The repetition calls attention to the enduring concern of the playwright with perversions, which an untempered pursuit of sex and money can induce in governance. There is an attempt to bring to the open, the secret unpleasant conduct of public officials, as the word “naked” connotes. Thus, the repetition shows that the idea of “nakedness” in the drama assumes a greater meaning beyond what is ordinarily associated with it. Impliedly, the distorted form of democracy of the era is being “nakedised” in its ugliness for all and sundry to watch.

Also worthy of note is the lexical repetition of “women”, “naked” and “money” above which is reinforced by the use of syntactical parallelism.

Naked women, half-naked women
 women about to be naked,
 women who have always been naked
 women who will die naked...

Piling up and varying the tone of these lexical items confer on the passage a kind of musicality expected in an opera, but importantly, it is also amusing. Being isolated for necessary attention is the primary object of the play – snags in a democratic experiment. To wit, the repeated words can be seen as foregrounding elements of discourse. They are advanced and made prominent right from the beginning to show a kind of “dislocation” in the ordinary meaning. Consequently, the words assume wider significations beyond the familiar ones socially ascribed to them. Repetition alerts the audience to the fact that their usage in the text carries with it something thematically special and of interest. It is in this sense that one can appreciate Bicycle’s distorted repetition that the woman is “nakedly naked”. To reiterate, the concept of “nakedisation” in the play parallels the exposition of shady deals by public officials like Awero for the society to see.

On a general note, deliberate shading up of meaning through ambiguity; pun, wit, parody and linguistic deviations like malapropism are major constituents of diction in the play. Against this background, a conflation of disparate ideas are often attempted to induce laughter or censure. In this circumstance, two characters are

pursuing different ideas. One of these ideas tends to be suppressed by a character who is not aware of it, or seems not to be interested. The other character inadvertently keeps the idea in focus, as it bounces back. It is reminiscent of the irrepressible comic idea which Bergson likens to "Punch and Judo show" or Jack-in-the Box" (745). Each of the characters through a repetition of the irrepressible inflexibly pursues his/her obsessions and becomes ludicrous in the process. For instance, when Awero and Suuru arrive the hotel for lodging, each time Suuru asks Jimoh: "Now, can we have a room?". Jimoh insists on narrating how he is made a chief and why he should be appropriately addressed so (16-17).

The portrait of a democratic attempt constructed in *Midnight Hotel* is a caricature that is ridiculous, hateful and aimed at motivating correction. Perhaps, the inability to address departures from democratic norms impelled the forceful overthrow of politicians by soldiers on December 31, 1983. Unfortunately, the latter too could not set the country on the path of democratic development as it merely imposed solution from top to bottom and not the other way round as democracy entails. It became ruthless in its campaign to combat the misdeeds of the ousted politicians through its War Against Indiscipline. Its actions in this direction sooner became absurd, - ready materials for dramatic devaluation. These absurd steps form the subject of Soyinka's *From Zia With Love*.

From Zia With Love

Soyinka's *From Zia With Love* is a censure of military dictatorship. The play contends that the military undermines civic democratic culture through its rigid centralisation of command, its disdain for dissent and its legitimisation of coercion as means of pursuing political ends. Satire, the generic fulcrum of the play fulfills the mission of literary demystification of the "uniform" which has over the years become a metonymic icon of repression, violence and other anti-democratic practices.

From Zia With Love presents a theatrical distillation of actual historical events that took place during the military rule of Generals Muhammadu Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon in 1984. In spite of the authorial denial of "any correlation with actuality",¹⁴ the play evokes in the audience a feeling of déjà vu. The mock-heroic tenor of its discourse, the incongruity of its shifting characters, the burlesque and exaggerated action and the ludicrous costume – all show military rule as virulent. A demeaning picture of military rulers is created, showing the erstwhile idols of the people in 1966 now as "vampires"¹⁵. To an extent, the mission of the regime in focus is encapsulated in the song – "Rap of the Military Time – Machine":

... We're building a new nation,
cleaning out the rot
Ending your civilian torpor
striking while it's hot (FZWL, 85).

The play depicts a collection of inmates from diverse socio-economic background, trapped in a maximum-security prison. The inmates are largely victims of

a skewed penology of the military government that Soyinka is satirising. Under the directorship of Commodore Hyacinth, a self-styled Master of Disguise (MD), the inmates transform the prison into a stage in a theatre-within-the-theatre. In that theatre, disrespect for human rights among other perceived undemocratic deeds of the regime are exhibited. The prison, euphemistically referred to as Amorako local Government, re-creates a power structure that is congruent with military autocracy.

When the play opens, the prisoners are trying to liven things up through the performing arts of drama, music and dance. They transform the prison into local Government where a cabinet meeting of the new Eternal Ruling Council is in session. The meeting is presided over by the Cell Commandant and Commander-in-Chief, Commodore Hyacinth (C.C. or C-in-C). In attendance are ministers of Health, Labour, Agriculture, Water Resources, Transportation, Home Affairs, Education and Information and Culture. Others include Hyacinth's A.D.C., Director of Security (Major Awam) and Chief of Staff or No. 2. The session provides a piquant parody of the reigning political order outside the theatre. Two worlds are immediately conjured and juxtaposed: the universe of the prison with a row of cells and the fantastic world of Amorako State House whose imagined opulence and *genius loci* harshly jars with the former.

The cabinet session is taking the progress report (or lack of it) from each of the ministers. It starts with the Health Minister who paradoxically reports that the health situation in the Local Government is stable even in the face of a raging epidemic that

has claimed seven lives in the last twenty-four hours. The Director of Security, Major Awam, follows him. The latter's panoptic, liberal and more congenial definition of his responsibilities stirs disquiet in Hyacinth and other ministers. To the regime of Hyacinth, security, which seems to be its principal project, embraces repression, espionage, a network of surveillance and torture. Number Two expresses the regime's policy on security, showing it as incompatible with democratic practice:

No. 2: ...on this council, security means only one thing- counter-subversion. Counter subversive talk. Counter rumour mongering. Counter incitement to subversion (FZWL, 8).

But to Major Awam whose deviant behaviour earns him long detention without trial in the first place, security is a function of adequate provision of good infrastructure like transportation, education, medical care, food and shelter. The absence of these can only lead to chaos, insecurity and political instability.

At this juncture, three new 'refugees' (convicts) are introduced to the Local Government. They are Emuke, Detiba and Miguel Domingo. They have been sentenced to death by a Special Military Tribunal for drug trafficking and are awaiting execution. But the distinction between the duplex fictive realities wanes when the convicts are allocated "accommodation in the transit quarters" (near the latrine buckets used by inmates) and later introduced to Amorako by the welcoming committee with "a barrage of slaps" (13). Though they are rescued and relocated to another cell, it is not until they have been educated on the norms of Amorako by the Ministers of Education and Information. One of these norms is the presentation of Curriculum

Vitae (C.V). The C.V is ordinarily meant to supply details about a detainee's name, age, profession, and most importantly, the crime that earns him detention or conviction. Such records according to the Minister of Education, is to enable the Eternal Ruling Council "plan the economy or make the five-year Revolving Development Plans" (16).

The C.V presentation is a comic performative device, which enables the audience to stand back and have what seems to be a reliable first-hand scorecard of the regime. This makes the preceding cabinet meeting a prologue in the dramatic proceeding. The entertainment potentials of the C.V presentation are remarkable, especially when one considers the fact that its participants are prisoners who are really in need of divertissement. Besides, the chosen mode of presentation can be entertaining, as it can be chanted in form of poetry, delivered as a sermon or rendered in any popular musical composition like juju, talazo, fuji or disco. Actually, the most important enactment of the inmates is the youth's C.V which features the story of Sebe-Irawe and his clients like the woman in search of a lost sister, the drug-addict student looking for a "fix" and the Wing Commander. The latter is trying to recover the "lost-in-transit" 50 kilogramme of cocaine shipped from Pakistan with the curious love and official commendation of General Zia. Going by Wing Commander's estimation, the consignment of cocaine is worth one hundred million U.S. dollars.

For the rest of the play, actions oscillate between the fantasia, revelry and extravaganza of C.V presentation in the General cell on the one hand and the sobriety,

gloom cynicism and waned *joie de vivre* of the three convicts in Cell C. (i.e. Emuke, Detiba and Miguel). The major connective, however, is the exposition through dialogue and action of the arbitrariness of the military regime being censured. This exposition is also accented at intervals by the harangue of the military (expressed through hidden loud-speakers) on Battle Against indiscipline (BAI).¹⁶

The play ends on a note of chaos and gloom that is not unusual in Soyinka's dramaturgy. What promises to be a resolution is after all, irresolution, or at best, a complication. From the discussion of the three Trustees, it is decipherable that Commodore Hyacinth is pressing further his long-time plan to escape from gaol and challenge Sebe's over lordship of the underworld. It is also learnt that a senior military officer (perhaps, Wing Commander) has been discovered murdered in a mysterious circumstance. His body is found at the cross-roads (the Yoruba home for Esu Elegbara) with his throat slashed, vital organs missing and his white wrapper drenched in blood. In another development, three stakes have been prepared for the execution of three condemned criminals. Emuke, Detiba and Miguel have been taken away from their cells, for execution as inferable from the stage direction:

SOUND OF DISTANT MACHINE-GUN FIRE.
THE TRUSTIES FREEZE. A PAUSE, THEN
THREE SPACED-OUT SINGLE SHOTS.---
IN THE BACKGROUND, THE PRISONERS'
VOICE RISE IN A DIRGE (FZWL, 101).

This solemn, threnodic ending is contrary to the effervescence of the beginning. Notwithstanding, Soyinka's goal of devaluation of the uniform is clear..

The conversation between Wing Commander and Sebe-Irawe shows that the control of political power has conferred on the military, a significant control of the economy too. As such, members of the junta use power to pursue personal economic gains rather than the larger interest of the people. That the illegal drug trade is conducted in the play as a state business (a government-to-government affair) is quite instructive. As Wing Commander reveals, "The operation was master-minded by the very cream of the ruling junta." (73). This portrays members of the ruling military council as patrons and accomplices in the hard drug trafficking. Ironically, they orchestrate campaigns against it apparently to divert public's attention from their involvement. The irony crystallises in the realisation that those who enact legislation against drug trafficking, those who mount aggressive battle against acts of indiscipline and those who sit in judgment over suspects are sometimes as guilty of the offence as those they arrest, try, convict and execute. Consequently, the demarcation between the reality of the Wing Commander as a member of the Ruling Council that is warring against hard drug, and his image as an eminent importer of narcotics evoke contempt in the audience against the ultimate target of the play – military autocracy.

In a similar vein, the experience of Emuke, Detiba and Miguel is to expose the fundamental flaw of the military concept of justice. The regime respects the statutes when convenient and disregards them when greater interests that it identifies with are at stake. Besides, its penal system is not a reformative, but a deterrent to "subversive elements". Hence, severe capital punishment is favoured, instead of light sentences in

respect of drug trade. Arbitrariness, inequality and unpredictability are the distinguishing traits of justice in this era, as the ordeal of the trio would illustrate. They are sentenced to death for an offence, which before it is committed, carries only seven years imprisonment. They are tried under a decree that has retroactive effect and which impliedly could not have passed through popular democratic processes of law making. Moreover, they are tried by a Special Military Tribunal (not by a regular court) that has unlimited powers. The offence attracts no bail, no option of fine or jail terms, but death sentence. There is no right of appeal to any court as the Head of state has usurped judicial powers. Miguel cynically sums up these breaches of democratic norms:

MIGUEL: Ah, what does it matter any way? Why do we deceive ourselves? We're living in a lawless time (FZWL, 94).

The play's setting tellingly explores the leit motif of devaluation. The reality of the prison tagged Amorako Local Government is strategically altered to provide a platform through which the playwright can parade a distorted, yet, veritable picture of undemocratic conducts of military rule. Here is a domineering centre with plenary powers. The picture is to stir a vehement revulsion in the audience toward the constructed absolutist political order, just as they are wont to respond to the setting and the action enacted within it. By setting the play in a Maximum Security Prison, Soyinka captures in essence, the feelings of siege and immurement that mark the

tenure of Buhari/ Idiagbon regime in history. But the reference goes beyond this and extends to any military dictatorship. As the rule of law and human freedom gradually wither under dictatorship, the entire society shrinks into a delicate prison yard, where human dignity is negated with impunity as enacted in Amorako with its inhuman condition of existence, its deplorable facilities and above all, the inhuman treatment of prisoners by fellow prisoners and prison authorities. The place becomes a centre for dehumanisation rather than reformation. The dictator too sooner becomes a prisoner of his own making due to his policies of exclusion and alienation, which are quite unnecessary in a democratic system. To penetrate the ambivalence of the prison, therefore, is to behold the negation of democracy and its consequent abasement in the play.

Besides, naming the prison cells after recognisable districts in Africa confers on the censure a measure of heartiness and credibility. It concretely points to the ubiquity of authoritarian rule in one form or the other all over Africa either as one party civilian rule, military regime or monarchy¹⁷ Indeed authoritarianism is like an "epidemic" reported by the Health Minister, gnawing at the continent's democratic heart, impeding its development. It can be added that gilding prison cells with Local Government designation is an example of ironic dissimulation, which is a formal strategy of satire. This means the replacement of a dishonourable or an unpleasant epithet with a more genial one. The designation creates suspense in the audience at the

beginning and mediates the misery and tension of the prison. But as the action further unfolds, Amorako gradually reveals a grim-faced and truculent polity.

COMM: Oga, we dey die here o. We done petition so tey we done tire. I tell you say we dey die one by one.

HEALTH: Everybody skin here get craw-craw. De one wey no get craw-craw, 'e get beri-beri. De one wey no get beri-beri, e get kwashi-okor. De one wey no get kwashi-okor, e get jedi-jedi. De one wey no get jedi-jedi.... (FZWL, 21).

The prison is congested as a result of the repressive policies of the regime that "sends everybody in here as if space is no problem" (FZWL, 23). The image of Amorako therefore merges with that of Maximum Security Prison out of which it is projected:

A ROW OF CELL IN A HALF-ARC ON ONE SIDE OF THE STAGE. ON THE OTHER SIDE IS ONE LARGE CELLS, LIT BY A Kerosine LANTERN AND TWO OR THREE CANDLES... IN A CORNER IS A LARGE METAL DUST-BIN WHICH SERVES THE INMATES AS A LATRINE. SUSPICIOUS STAINS ARE CLEARLY VISIBLE ON THE FLOOR AND IN THE WALLS AROUND THE BIN: THAT CORNER OF THE FLOOR IS ALSO WET. THE ODD RAGS, WORN TOWELS, ENAMEL AND TIN MUGS AND PLATES ETC., ETC., COMPLETE THE ACCESSORIES (FZWL, 1).

There are three levels of action in the play: the General Cell where Hyacinth and his council are, the transformed space of play-within-the-play featuring Sebe, Youth, Woman and Wing Commander, and Cell C where Emuke, Detiba and Miguel are detained. Though the three levels are separate loci of discourse, they are contiguous in their burlesque of military autocracy, and are thereby related. Each of the levels is

recognisably apart from the others with its unique acts. Yet, they are linked by the identified motive of action. The consequent interaction between these levels of fantasy, super-fantasy and reality draws along with it the exposition of the arbitrariness of the censured regime.

To facilitate a smooth movement within the planes of action identified above, Soyinka brings to bear the staging techniques of his agit prop sketches tagged “Before the Blackout” and “Before the Blowout” in the 1960s and 1980s respectively. These are witty topical sketches staged with scanty, sometimes symbolic scenic representation. They also made use of improvisation, sparse props, suggestive costumes and multiple role-playing. Hence, in *From Zia With Love*, packing cases, broken stools, chairs, benches, camp beds, pillows and buckets are used to create sets for the various enactments. The same items are used to supply musical accompaniments to songs in the play. These props and symbolic setting stress the functionality or literariness of the play as it is, through these theatrical elements, being distanced from historical actuality on which it is founded.

Contrary to what obtains in Soyinka’s previous plays like *Death and the king’s Horseman*, *The Strong Breed* and *The Jero Plays*, *From Zia With Love* avoids the conventional dramatic units of Acts and Scenes. Neither does it adopt the two-part division of *A Play of Giants* and *Requiem for a Futurologist*. Rather, the play, which can probably run for about 110 minutes in performance is like a One-act-play whose

internal discursive boundaries are marked by scene changes and lighting as indicated at intervals in the stage direction. (This one-act structure is also employed in *The Beatification of Areaboy: a Lagosian kaleidoscope*). There are eight of such boundaries in *From Zia With Love*.

The one-act structure in a general sense underscores the writer's bid to construct a unicentric military order in spite of its pretension to democracy. Though there is a semblance of pluralism, mass participation and diffusion of power portrayed in the cabinet session, the power centre remains the Cell Commandant, Commodore Hyacinth who is actually in firm control of the "zombified" inmates. He decrees when they should laugh and when they should alter their mood (12). Each of the characters especially in the General Cell has "pre-assigned places". This regimentation and lack of freedom illustrate the condition of citizens in an autocratic military polity. Perhaps, a further probe of the intrinsic character of devaluation aesthetics (through characterisation) will be appropriate here in order to underscore the playwright's mission of demystifying the military.

From the beginning, Soyinka creates a military oligarchic dispensation revolving around the personality of Hyacinth. Curiously, the dramatis personae are prisoners who are ordinarily social rejects. The marginal status of prisoners in the society affords them a measure of detachment, which they seize so as to stand aside and make a somewhat scurrilous satire out of their experience. The satire is usually

passed off as self-mockery, but in this case, it becomes an undisguised criticism of military rulers from the oppressed point of view.

The inmates are distinguished in the main by their grotesquery and ludicrousness. According to the director's note, they are mixed bag:

FIRST OFFENDERS AND HARDENED CONVICTS, POLITICAL DETAINEES, "AWAITING-TRIAL" ETC. THEY INCLUDE SOME DISABLED, SEMI-CRAZED OR ECCENTRIC AS WELL AS THE RESTLESS AND LISTLESS (FZWL, 1).

The prison parades a "farrago" of aberrations. The slightly "manic" Cell Commandant leads the inmates. It is this order of "disorder" that Soyinka seeks to re-inscribe into the consciousness of the audience so as to induce in them what he describes in an interview with Chuck Mike as "a far more devastating internal re-appraisal" (44). The deviation from the "normal" by the inmates recalls the deviation from democratic conducts of the regime that they parody. The departure is accentuated in the burlesque that takes over the stage during the C.V presentation of Youth/student. High burlesque is employed in the prisoner's assumption of military and bureaucratic offices complete with appropriate titles and costume. Hyacinth is a naval officer – Commodore – with an aide-de-camp. The Director of Security is an army Major (Awam). There is a Wing Commander who is a member of the ruling Military Council. Through high burlesque, the playwright exaggerates the arbitrariness of the regime so that the audience

perceives something simultaneously laughable and hateful in the overall picture, thus, calling for urgent amendment.

Nevertheless, the choice of prisoners is made apt, noting the vindictive motive of satire. The prisoners suffer excruciating neglect and sometimes extortion from prison authorities. Consequently, they (prisoners) are aggrieved and justifiably nurse a rankling grudge against the state. Apart from this, many of the inmates are victims of the regime's spate of unlawful arrest and detention without trial, thereby made to drink to the lees in jail. They have an axe to grind with institutions and persons considered responsible for their ordeal. Hence, they respond with mocking revenge as evident in such songs like "Oga warder, Oga warder" (22), "Song of the Diplomatic" (56), "Song of State Assignment" (77) and "Rap of the Military Time Machine" (82).

Pivotal to the project of military demystification is the character of Commander-in-Chief, Commodore Hyacinth. He is set up as an effigy of familiar shortcomings of such a regime like arbitrariness, repression and detestation of contrary view. As a self-acclaimed artistic director and a disciplined disciple of late Maestro, Hubert Ogunde, he is the alter ego of the playwright. He is an unflattering "Master of Disguise" (MD) He can also be described as an ingenious eelworm who embodies the "mess" of absolutism. When his character dissolves unobtrusively into Wing Commander, he still personifies the burlesque of the uniform. Hence, Hyacinth/Wing Commander concourse illustrates the trickster's role in the African concept of satire,

both as the target and as the agent of satire¹⁹ Coincidentally, however, in *From Zia with Love*,²⁰ the two possibilities are fused and manifested in the fluid interlink between reality and mimesis depicted in the play.

Hyacinth's grotesquery and consequent devaluation is borne by his costume:

NAVAL OFFICER CAP IS PERCHED JAUNTILY ON HIS
HEAD. BEHIND HIM STANDS ANOTHER INMATE
"SHOULDERING ARMS" WITH A BROOMSTICK WHILE
ANOTHER STANDS AT THE ENTRANCE WITH A PIECE
OF PLANK HELD LIKE A SUB-MACHINE GUN (FZWL, 1)

To support this image in his speeches, he chooses his range of vocabulary (register) from navigation or sea faring. The aim is to depict a homology between a social reject (a slightly manic prisoner) and an experienced military officer in power.

The three planes of actions identified above are activated by the impresario profile of Hyacinth. He is like a director of a play. Even when he literally slips out of his reality as a prisoner into a delusion of grandeur as a naval officer (*Commodore*) and later as a Wing Commander who is also an influential member of the Ruling Council, he projects the oddity of military's mode of governance. It can be inferred that it is difficult to promote or nurture democratisation in the face of such an autocratic order marked by patrimonial conception of the state.

Commodore Hyacinth typifies an absolute ruler who brooks no opposition and demands unquestioning obedience to his pronouncements. He is surrounded largely by

“citizens” who respond acquiescingly to his biddings, thereby making him to appear as being firmly in control of affairs of the inmates. This is well evident in his reaction to a disagreement between the Minister of Agriculture and Minister of Water Resources over the incursion of Major Awam into their portfolios in his situation report presentation:

COMM: Silence! Any more of that ancient bickering
and I'll merge both Ministries into Agriculture
and Water Resources then abolish both in
one stroke instead of two! (FZWL, 5).

Curiously, the inmates laugh when he laughs and feel sad when he “decrees” a change of mood. His gestures command instant obedience, be it silence or sleep. In an instance, he “breaks into a prolonged guffaw which is taken up by the inmates, and later cut it off with another gesture” (FZWL, 15). It necessarily follows then that he does not hide his aversion for contrary views proffered by those he considers as “radicals” and “extremists” because they demand urgent restoration of democratic civil rule.²⁰ He dismisses them as “Eunuchs! Impotents! Incompetent! Agitators! Bearded Bastards! (FZWL, 10-11). Yet, the ambivalence in his character is brought to the fore through an ironical claim that Amorako under his leadership practices democracy:

COMM: (preening) We run a democracy here you see,
 so everything is done by alphabetical order. We begin with "A",
 so I come first. May I welcome you formally - Commodore
 Ayacinth at your service (FZWL, 18).

Though his name, correctly spelt, starts with "H" and consequently does not come first in the alphabetical arrangement, the deliberate manipulation that makes him first expresses the perversion of the due process for individualistic or sectarian interests typical of military regimes. These are ills, which Soyinka contends should be eliminated before a genuine democratic order can be established.

The devaluative import of the name "Hyacinth" lies in its symbolism. It is a trope used to capture the military rulership that Hyacinth represents, as constituting a great obstacle to democratisation and national development. As water hyacinths are rarely salubrious to navigation and fishing (and by extension, economic prosperity), so does the military regime impede democratic culture. Hyacinths are insidious weeds or hidden monsters that entangle swimmers' legs with "slimy long roots". Miguel and Detiba further illuminate this symbolic link:

MIGUEL: I suppose we can't even enjoy that occasional distaction now.

The hyacinths must have stopped the motor boats...

DETIBA: (Joining Miguel at the window) oh yes, the boats have stopped.

Those weeds have made life miserable for everyone (FZWL, 27).

The song “Ode to commodore Ayacinth” (18-20) equally extends the weed symbolism with soldiers taken as weeds in governance. The song captures their paradoxical involvement in politics and the sad reality of their intractability.

Commodore Hyacinth is closely related to Sebe-Irawe in this epistemological spectrum. Sebe is a ferment of attraction and repulsion, awe and vulgarity. He is attractive for his brazen wit, serious mindedness and vast knowledge of the universe. However, he is repelling for his viciousness and criminal tendencies. To him, human life is worth little especially when the affected life attempts to or actually constitutes an impediment to the smooth running of his underworld emporium. Indeed, Sebe is a sinister, macabre figure providing the rallying point in the underworld where he is undoubtedly the suzerain. He is a thin but vital link in the chain of crime as a receiver of stolen goods, hard drug merchant, kidnappers’ agent and so on. As Wing Commander justly remarks: “nearly all the underworld report here, sooner or later” (FZWL, 74). In this regard, Sebe is an inter-textual reference to Peachum in *Opera Wonyosi* and its Augustan/Brechtian antecedents – *The Beggar's Opera* and *The Three Penny Opera*. His designation as “Sebe-Irawe Oju odo” bears an ontological as well as a theatrical affinity with that of Hyacinth. He is a lethal snake (Sebe) that hides under dried leave (irawe) on the ground. In his self introduction:

...My kind of Sebe doesn't wait for you on lake. It waits in the water. Under leaf, over leaf. Under lake. Over lake. Under sea... Overseas... (FZWL, 38).

A benumbing aura of mystique surrounds Sebe's personality. He is as deadly as notable African despots in history, yet, he claims that violence is alien to his temperament. Actually, he presides over a "mafia" which recalls the mode of military governance. In one breath, he affirms his modesty, simplicity and sincerity, presenting himself not as a criminal but as a hard working and honest entrepreneur engaging in a legitimate business. But in another, his violent inclination takes over, striking a kinship with his reptilian complement – Sebe (Python). Apart from his apathetic responses to the death of Woman's sister, his treatment of the student underscores this point.

A SEEMINGLY DISEMBODIED ARM MAKES A SWIFT GRAB FOR THE YOUNG MAN'S HEAD AND YANKS IT ROUND, DROPS AN ALBUM. SEBE'S OTHER FOREARM PINS THE YOUTH'S NECK AGAINST THE WINDOW SILL. SEBE GRABS THE MONEY AND BEGINS TO STUFF THE OPEN MOUTH WITH THE NOTES (FZWL, 35).

Sebe is notable for his gibes at the foibles of the military especially their knack for forceful seizure of power and subsequent governance for personal ends. His admonition to Wing Commander in the latter's search for the lost cocaine consignment is relevant:

SEBE: You can always mount a coup.

W.COMM: (Looking round wildly) Don't say that again!

I don't find it funny

SEBE: It's not meant to be funny. It is accepted cover-up practice
(FZWL, 75).

Here, Sebe puns on the acronym of coup to ridicule this coercive method of accessing power, which has claimed several lives in Africa, whether successful or foiled. C.O.U.P means COver – Up - Practice.

In summary, Soyinka creates in both Hyacinth and Sebe Irawe, the paradox of defence/destruction complementarities of the military. But the destruction element has been accentuated in reality and that necessitates urgent intervention, in this case, through the theatre as it is being done in *From Zia With Love* among other plays. It is ironic and absurd that Sebe is in close association with the underworld, just as he is with members of the ruling junta who are waging a battle against indiscipline. In the course of the action, through the dialogic interaction between Sebe and Wing Commander, the line of distinction gradually thins out between the underworld and the regime, between common drug traffickers and military officers. Sebe hints at this absurdity when he declares: “I tell you wing commander, when you people are involved in our business, we know we are safe” (FZWL, 55).

Wing Commander (played by Cell Commandant) is equally important in the programme of martial devaluation. The stage direction describes him thus:

A MAN (THE COMMANDANT) APPEARS WITH EXAGGERATED FURTIVENESS, HEAD DOWN AS IF TO AVOID RECOGNITION. HIS VOLUMINOUS AGBADA GIVES THE SAME SUGGESTION (FZWL, 43).

There is a deliberate attempt to strip Wing Commander of the awe, privileges and impunity that the military uniform inherently confers on the officer in Nigerian context. By shooting him down from his privileged height, the playwright brings him to the level of mortals and confronts him as well as the audience with his wrong doings through a brazen auto-revelation of improprieties. Sebe-Irawe is on hand to activate and complement these revelations. Wing Commander gets the 50 kilogrammes of Cocaine through an abuse of diplomatic immunity, which is a fundamental code of international relations. Diplomatic immunity stems from the idea that nations, regardless of their strength, size and wealth are equal and sovereign. The principles of equality and sovereignty naturally confer on nations a good measure of trust and respectability. This implies that if an official representative of country A in country B says that the content of a bag that he is bringing into country B is salt, the declaration must be taken by the host country as salt and not with a pinch of salt, as to warrant a search of such a bag. Wing commander and the drug syndicate capitalise on this laxity. The 50-kilogramme bag of cocaine is tucked inside a gift of 1000 bags of fertilizer donated by Pakistan as its contribution to the mass food production programmes of Ruling Council. To give it maximum protection, Wing Commander ensures that law enforcement agents ship the consignment as a special presidential cargo that is automatically immuned from routine inspections. Though the bag is later intercepted by pirates, the scheme is ingenious and shows the involvement of the

commanding height of the military government in drug peddling – a crime against which it has launched offensive.

The desperate search for the missing “prime grade cocaine” and the agreement with Sebe to manipulate the machinery of the state to declare a state of emergency and “fish out” the lost cocaine are illustrations of the exercise of power based on arbitrariness of military rule. Sebe has advised Wing Commander to turn the ultimate time machine on the people to deal with past, present and future offenders and suspects. A war is to be launched against drug. The war is to be prosecuted with deserving ferocity and urgency, passing it off as a matter of public interest. Given its military orientation, it is not likely to be opposed. Meanwhile, the crusade will not be limited to drug. It will touch other immoral conducts (?) like “slackness, rigidity, forgery, cannery, venery, revelry, smuggling, ogling, laziness, eagerness, apathy, telepathy, intolerance, permissiveness, academia, kleptomania, cultism, nudity, drunkenness, superstition, godlessness, loitering, muttering, rioting, malingering, rumour mongering...” (FZWL, 82)

The all - encompassing list of offences steers the direction of the play back to its origin. It goes back from Sebe’s sanguinary underworld to the other world of the prison or Amorako, which is overwhelmed by the harangue of military voice coming from hidden loudspeakers. The devaluation strategies culminate in the caricature that takes over the stage while the inmates perform the “Rap of the military Time

Machine". The song is rendered in celebration of the absurd reforms to be pursued by the regime:

THE PRISONERS STOMP ON STAGE IN A VARIETY OF MILITARY CAST-OFFS, SOME WITH GAS MASKS-HALF FACE WITH GOGGLES SEVERAL WITH "TYSON" CREW CUTS, CAVORTING IN "RAP" MOTIONS. THEY GO THROUGH THEIR CONTORTIONS IN PRECISION DRILL (FZWL, 82)

The songs and dances encapsulate the demystifying and reformative intentionality of satire. They express in their topicality and poetic verve, the observed vices prevalent in military autocracy. The critical spirit of the play is coming against the background of the prisoners' temporary release from their psychic and social constraints and the consequent transmutation of their exterior reality through mimesis. They ridicule internal and external authorities in their songs without any fear of reprisals from the warders to the military government.

Lyrics of the songs are composed in line with set rhyming patterns (couplet or alternate rhyme), reminiscent of Augustan (Western) Satire. It can, therefore, be said that elements of song, music and dance are brought to bear on the playwright's war of attrition waged on all artistic fronts against a political order (or rather, disorder) that is patently antipodal to democracy. Against that polity, it is imperative that the society has to construct an alternative. From "Ode to Commodore Ayacinth" (18-20), to "Song of the Social Prophylactic" (43-45), "Song of the Diplomatic Bag" (56-57), "Song of State Assignment" (77-78) and "Rap of the Military Time- Machine" (82-

88), the songs are united in their ludicrousness. They are logical yet, fictional. They reinforce the general hallucinatory, delusive even though credible atmosphere of the play. A totalitarian or unicentric system of opinion formation is crucial to the political order being depicted and that purpose is served by the amplification of only one opinion through the military's voice on the *Battle Against Indiscipline*. Here is a world, similar to that painted in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* in which the human mind can be secured through brainwashing, verbal bombardment and subliminal persuasion – the type borne by the harangue of the military. Amorako is a closed state supported by propaganda, and in which the process of education or socialisation becomes a process of “incorporation” into the only reigning opinion. Unfortunately here, the freedom to secure information is abridged and controlled, contrary to democratic norms. Besides, the repetitive nature of the propaganda breed monotony which in turn may lead to apathy and contempt in the citizens, and by extension, alienation from the state.

Soyinka's diction in *From Zia With Love* is laden with pun, paradox, irony, symbolism and hyperbole. They co-operate in the building of an overall devaluational aesthetics. Soyinka, more especially delights in deliberate doubling of meaning through pun, paradox, irony and symbolism. These enable him to juxtapose two realities – the fictional and the real to show a lack of correspondence between the ideal or normal and the stage presentation. These rhetorical elements also lend humour to the play's devaluational tone. For instance, in outlining practical measures which

Wing Commander should adopt in pursuing the missing bag of cocaine, Sebe puns on the coincidence between naval uniform which is “white cloth, black cap” and Esu’s mythical cap of confusion. The latter is said to have one side white and the other side black”.²¹

Parallelism also features in the dialogue. This linguistic device, as earlier remarked, implies using a particular stylistic effect, whether syntactic, phonological or lexical to draw the audience’s attention to something considered by the author and the speaker to be of importance especially in the theme of the work. Thus, parallelism entails layers of reinforcing a deep truth within the context of a text’s overall significations. Sometimes, it is used to achieve humour while still saying something profound. A character may set out from a familiar proverb or idiomatic expression and then render the expression in a literal sense and take it out of its terrain of familiarity through deliberate distortion or pun, into another plane of meaning still exploring the same essential components of the proverb or idiom. The distinction achieves a satiric humour:

DETIBA: Well, I said the same thing, didn’t I? But – what
happened has happened. We are all in the same boat
(emphasis added).

EMUKE: No, we no dey inside de same boat. Even from before,
na inside separate boat we dey. And in own boat better
pass we own. We day inside custody, so we no get

choice. We must appear before tribunal whether we like it or not. But in own case, e get bail (FZWL, 25).

“To be in the same boat” is an idiomatic expression that means, “to be in the same condition”. But Emuke renders it literally and it humorously points to inequality and class differences in the administration of justice under the military dispensation. One character who is enamoured of this style is Commodore Hyacinth

COMM: (His booming voice drowns the speakers). We run an open government and have nothing to hide, no skeletons in the cupboard, no dirty linen in the wash, no fly in the ointment, no mote in thine own eye, no sand-sand in the gari... Abandon shame all who enter here. It's paradise before the apple of knowledge (FZWL, 31-32).

Referring to the prison as a “paradise before the apple of knowledge” is an ironic distortion of the biblical Garden of Eden. The sense of an ideal polity founded on orderliness and perfection created earlier for Amorako is noteworthy. This same sense of perfection informs the ethical crusade of the regime outside subsumed in the War Against Indiscipline (WAI). But the autocratic nature of the regime flies in the face of these claims. The syntactic parallelism adopted not only underlines the audience's knowledge of the character of Hyacinth, but also contributes to the profundity of the truth which is conveyed in the play about military rule “Skeletons in cupboard”, “dirty linen in the wash”, “fly in the ointment”, “mote in thine eye” and “sand-sand in the

gari” are idiomatic phrases pointing to imperfections which Amorako Local Government (prison) presided over by Hyacinth is supposed to be free from. But taking cognisance of the repression and the unhygienic condition of living here, the irony becomes clear. A picture close to the above ideals is obtainable only in a democratic and transparent dispensation. It is certainly elusive in the autocratic order run by Hyacinth.

Sebe-Irawe, as a master trickster “who knows how to give a twist to everything” (81) also adopts deliberate distortion of familiar idiom in his diction. But added to this is the use of euphemism in a bid to make somewhat tolerable, what is inherently shocking and objectionable. For instance, “cocaine” is often referred to by Sebe (in conversation with Wing Commander) as “stuff”, “package” (39), “heavy consignment”, “that commodity” (46).

In addition, the playwright’s linguistic choices pay close attention to the musicality of language. Language in this context has its own melody, which renders it appealing, even though the reality being conveyed is repulsive.

This chapter has examined the theatrical and rhetorical elements adopted by Osofisan and Soyinka in their devaluation of the undemocratic conducts of two regimes, one civilian, and the other military. While Osofisan takes on the second attempt at civil rule and exposes its limitations through a comic operatic form, Soyinka engages the military government that supposedly came in to “clear the mess”

of civilians. While Osofisan is raucous in his attack on prebendal politics, Soyinka is acerbic in his depiction of military dictatorship. Within the serio-comic ambience of these plays, quite evident is the contempt for subversion of democratic principles which prebendalism and dictatorship represent.

What problematises their efforts however is that in the bid to create a distorted picture of the polity and render it ludicrous, the plays occasionally slip into the realm of farce, and thereby blunt the urge for reflection which satiric devaluation in the first place, should stimulate in the audience. Be that as it may, the two plays depict conducts and factors which are inimical to the attainment of genuine democracy and which must be avoided.

NOTES

- 1 Factors responsible for the early collapse of the Second Republic have been well documented. See for example Toyin Falola and Julius Ihonvbere. *The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* (1979-1984), Victor Ayeni and Kayode Soremekun *Nigeria's Second Republic*, Richard Joseph *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria* etc
- 2 Femi Osofisan, *Midnight Hotel*, Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1985. P.65. All other references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation MH.
- 3 Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Unity Party of Nigeria challenged the declaration by the Federal Electoral Commission of Alhaji Shehu Shagari as the winner of the 1979 presidential election based on his victory in 122/3 states of the federation in court. See accounts of this legal tussle in Kole Omotoso's *Just Before Dawn*.
- 4 The Comedy later developed into *Basi and Company*, a weekly television drama series on Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) network in the Eighties and early Nineties.
- 5 It is also a reversal of Feydeau's text because there, it is Boniface (man) who solicits the hands of Marcelle (woman) in the affair. He asks her to spend the night with him at the Hotel Paradiso
- 6 The continuous relevance of the play is confirmed by the fact that legislators in the third republic and the current democratic dispensation have not overcome the self-seeking and materialistic tendencies of the Second Republic censured in *Midnight Hotel*. See for instance Femi Osofisan "One 'dey 'sorry'...the other 'dey kampe'" in *The Comet* (Lagos) Sunday 30 April, 2000, p 10 See Joe Ighokwe

"The Trouble with the National Assembly", p.8 in the same edition. See also "Legislating To Steal" – cover story *Tell* (Lagos) 22 May. 2000. Pp. 14-23.

7 The subject is further explored in Soyinka's J.P record "Unlimited Liability Company", Ewuro Records, 1983. That these projects have not been realised to-date, points to the corruption that furnished them from inception

8. *Holy Bible* Matthew 6:19-21, St. Matthew 4:1-11. St. Luke 4: 1-13.

9. The seven Deadly Sins in medieval cosmology are Pride, Covetousness, Envy, Wrath, Gluttony, Sloth and Lechery.

10 The designation of the party itself is utopian and makes its success remote

11. Bode Osanyin has translated this play into English under the title: "Shattered Bridge".

12 "There is no art to know the mind's construction from the frown" (28). King Duncan in his discussion with Banquo provides this epigram in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The correct quotation is "There's no art, to find the mind's construction in the face" *Macbeth* I: IV, II. 12-13. "A beggar has no shoes" (30). The correct saying is "A beggar has no choice" "The spirit was willing, but not the neck" (63), rather than "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak". This is a biblical saying found in Matthew 26:41.

13. For example, Pastor Suuru punctuates his speeches with "Jah" nine times in the play. "In parliament" is a phrase that occurs 14 times in Awero's while Alatise registers his proverbs and idioms with "Eti roo" 29 times

14. Wole Soyinka. *From Zia With Love*. Ibadan: Fountain Publishers, 1992. Subsequent references are to this edition and are appropriately acknowledged in the text after the abbreviation FZWL.

15. Like their 1966 predecessors, members of Buhari/ Idiagbon regime seized power on account of “failed democracy”, down-turn in economy, collapsed infrastructure, high unemployment rate, mass poverty and so on. But by 1992 when this play was premiered, these social problems were as prevalent as they were before the military intervention, if not more.

16. *Battle Against Indiscipline* is derived from *War Against Indiscipline* (WAI) launched in 1984 by the regime of Generals Buhari and Idiagbon.

17. Katanga, Aburi and Soweto, for example are districts in Zaire (Central Africa), Ghana (West Africa) and South Africa (Southern Africa) respectively.

18. This point has been made in “The Tortoisean Archetype and the Matrix of Satire in Nigerian Drama”. *Ife: Journal of the Institute of Cultural Studies* 7 (July, 1999), 54-65.

19. Reference to Zia in a play that censures military autocracy is germane. Zia here is a theatrical recreation of the late Pakistan Prime Minister – General Mohammed Zia - Ul – Haq. Until his death in a plane crash on August 17, 1988, he had ruled Pakistan under martial law for eleven years. The regime was noted for repression as illustrated in the hanging of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Prime Minister on April 4, 1979. Nigeria and Pakistan, from historical evidence therefore, share common historical trajectory especially in terms of prolonged military rule and political instability.

20. It would be recalled that Late Dr. Tai Solarin, social critic suddenly appeared at Dodan Barracks in January 1984 during the inauguration of members

of the Buhari-led Supreme Military Council. Dr Solarin went with a letter requesting the new government, which had just banned all political activities, to conduct elections and restore civil rule within six months. He was later to be detained indefinitely and without trial by the regime. The oblique allusion to this in the play is to lend credence to the autocratic nature of the Amorako order.

21. Some scholars have advanced Esu Elegbara, the Yoruba trickster god as an archetype of satire. See for example, Femi Euba's *Archetypes, Imprecators and Victims of Fate: Origin and Development of Satire in Black Drama*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.

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CHAPTER FOUR

ASCENDANCY OF “DEMO” AND TRADO-EPIC DISCOURSE IN *YUNGBA YUNGBA AND AWAITING TROUBLE.*

In content and theatrical techniques, the trado-epic aesthetics is a dramatic discourse that emphasises the empowerment of the mass of the people or the collective (against individuals) to whom power actually belong in a democracy. This framework particularly creates a model political structure that, beyond the theatre, can impart on the democratisation process. Its participatory aesthetic is sensitive to the imperative of social justice, equity, equality, freedom, communal spirit and community action. Through a consolidation of traditional African performance elements and Brechtian epic theatre indices, dramatic works in this artistic category canvass popular struggle or mass-based action as the inevitable path to the termination of recurrent authoritarianism and the emergence of an alternative democratic political system in which people freely participate and their interests adequately represented. Thus, the plays critically challenge the audience to recognise the imperatives of social change and to upturn the existing undemocratic political and economic structures.

The realisation of this political and social responsibility informs the centering of conflicts on the antagonism between forces of despotic status quo and forces of democratic alternative. Debate, consultation, free exchange of ideas and contestation

of viewpoints between characters who sometimes, represent contending possibilities in power dynamics feature prominently in the works.

Apart from the foregoing, the mode of production is inherently "democratic" through the elimination of the invisible "Fourth Wall" that separates a smooth interrelationship between performer and spectators. Efforts are made to erase all forms of socio-political and economic distinctions among the people. Thus, across the theatre, a common humanity with common grievances and shared aspirations is created through the productional mechanism of these plays. Essentially, the works are geared towards the ascendancy of the masses or "demos" who occupy the fringe of political power.

One of the reasons that recommend this option is that its abiding identification with the sub altern class synchronises with the objective of a democratic mode of governance. Rather than endorsing the oligarchic political order that privileges the socially elevated few, playwrights here articulate the concern of members of the low class, who are oppressed and marginalised.

Secondly, its revolutionary spirit attunes to the social change crusade of writers. Nigerian playwrights who subscribe to this option perceive a similarity between the historical challenges in Europe in the 1920's that gave rise to the epic theatre and the historical actuality of post-independence Nigeria. Brecht in collaboration with Erwin Piscator finds a suitable theatrical expression of this social depression in Marxist revolutionary aesthetics, later codified into the epic theatre.

Brecht considers as inadequate, classical dramaturgy and the non-representational anarchic theatrical forms like Dadaism, Surrealism, the absurd and Symbolism. He also sees as delimiting the “well-made play” as well as the poetics of Realism and its convincing replica of real life, situation and characters, championed by the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen. In the same vein, he holds the “ slice of life” in all its harsh reality preferred by Naturalists like Emile Zola and August Strindberg in suspicion. (Hotchman, 245). Brecht as quoted by John Willet regards epic theatre as dynamic and the pro-classical Aristotelian drama as static on the account of the latter’s presentation of the world as it is:

Epic is dynamic and its task is to show the world
as it changes and also how it may be changed (57).

The same objective of searching for a dramatic form to express the need for a break with the status quo both at the political and artistic levels impelled the adoption of the trado-epic mode¹. Thus, its inward-looking exploration of the traditional African performance elements like oral narrative, myth, folk tales, song, music and dance reflect the yearning for a radical/ revolutionary departure from the aesthetics of first generation of Nigerian playwrights like Henshaw, Soyinka, Clark and Rotimi. The trado-epic aesthetics synthesise the above with similarly mass oriented artistic element from Western theatre embedded in Brecht’s epic mechanism.

Thirdly, the aesthetics is based on communal participation. It reaches back to the root of indigenous African theatre that is essentially a community’s affair. As

David Kerr rightly submits, “ Africa is a traditionally communal society with ethos of sharing and participation” (254). The evocation of that communal artistic spirit is a way of fostering democratic relationship in a modern society. Besides, in this framework, the playwright highlights those indigenous cultural values common to Africans like a sense of solidarity and communality upon which a modern concept of democracy that is attuned to the peculiarities of Africans’ contemporary realities can be created. Solidarity and collective struggle are essential ingredients in democratisation. This is because of the realisation that much as individuals may try, it is by coming together that a people can collectively effect a change in the political system. It follows that a political framework that centres collectivity or that is founded on the triumph of the common weal as against that which focuses on the action of a great personage whose fate determines that of the entire community, should be created.

Besides, the plays commonly proceed from a polemical assumption – the inevitability of social change. The process of achieving this change involves a practical struggle, conscientisation, popular awareness and ultimate collision with forces of inequality. Theatre is perceived as a medium toward which the urban poor, the unemployed, traders and other categories of the sub-altern can be goaded and guided toward taking a concrete action for change. Osofisan acknowledges this mission of the theatre in “The Terror of Relevance...” when he remarks: “...if we must change our societies, if the theatre must fulfill its vocation as an agent of

progress, the dramatists who create it have no option but to pitch their camp on the side of the common people, and against the formidable agents of the ruling classes” (88).

Arising from the epic substructure, plays under this artistic category are pitched against the Hegelian and Aristotelian principle that personal volition, character and inexorable divine will are determinants of man’s action. They believe that man as well as the political and economic conditions of his being are changeable, hence, the opportunity offered the spectator to encounter with a critical subtext, a social condition at a particular historical conjuncture with a view to changing it.

One can then agree with Rotimi’s submission that “ the salient feature which animate Brecht’s fundamental theory of *verfremdung* have their precedents in traditional African theatre” (254). Brecht’s/Piscator’s epic is just one of the creative and cultural tributaries that flow into the trado-epic artistic construct. For example, often encountered in the trado-epic construct are the reverie, ululation and earthiness that characterise traditional African performances. They are blended with alienating devices like episodic structuring of events, the rejection of linear principle of narration, or cause – effect development of plot, appeal to ‘reason’ (*verstand*) as against ‘empathy’ (*Einfuhlung*), tenuous definition of characters through multiple – role playing, adoption of collective heroism and heroisation of the disempowered, openendedness and flexibility of the text. All these are defining artistic elements on both sides of the theatrical divide i.e. African traditional theatre and Western

(German) epic theatre. The narrator, reminiscent of the griot or raconteur in traditional Africa (and its oriental equivalents which informed Brecht's aesthetics), supplies the nexus between the story, the performers and the spectators. Hence, the works explore folk-tales, myths, legends and contemporary history to fashion a participatory theatrical codes. These are demonstrated in our analyses of Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* and Olorunfoba -Oju's *Awaiting Trouble*.

Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest

Affirmatively dubbed "a parable of our times" *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* (hereinafter referred to as *Yungba Yungba*) is a theatrical abstraction of the struggle against authoritarian regimes across Africa in the Post Cold War era. These regimes are either in the form of military oligarchy or one party civilian rule. By July 1990 when the play was premiered at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, autocratic and authoritarian modes of governance have lost their appeal and fast becoming anachronistic. From Togo to Benin Republic, Ivory Coast, Zambia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Gambia, Liberia, Zaire, Somalia and Sierra-Leone there were strident agitations for the expansion of the political space to ensure wider participation of the common people who constitute the majority in broad decision-making and implementation. It became increasingly clear that only a democratic politics with government by consent, based on popular participation and with due regard for civil liberties was the most viable option before the continent in the renewed struggle for

liberation. The play was, therefore, produced against the backdrop of a pervasively waning valuation for despotism. As Osofisan remarks, *Yungba Yungba* is about “the struggle, all over Africa between self-perpetuating regimes and democratic forces.”² These despotic self-perpetuating regimes have as their legacies “massive foreign debts, mass poverty amidst the opulent lives of a small, super-rich elite, of inept and corrupt bureaucracies” (xv).

The play is not just presenting a Yoruba village festival, but also obliquely referring to pertinent political issues in contemporary Africa, i.e. the quest for true freedom and self-determination in “neo-colonies”³. The democratic quest in the play is enunciated within the context of a cultural event that attracts the participation of all and sundry - a festival of purgation in honour of the river goddess. The communal orientation of the festival coincides with the participatory essence of democratic governance. Besides, the festival, through its purifying prelude seeks to cleanse the society of accumulated vices and corruption of the preceding year and clear the path for the new year. In the same vein, the democratisation process is presented as a process of de-militarisation or de-tyrannisation of the polity, thus, the dialectical affinity between arts and politics is inscribed into the fabric of the festival as it explores the healthy intercourse between the pleasure principle of music, dance, song, story-telling on the one hand and the rigour of governance on the other. The fun and extravaganza of festival freely mix with the sobriety, dedication and self-discipline, which are necessary ingredients of statecraft.

Originally, the festival is a means of securing cosmic harmony between earthly beings and the spiritual world. It is an occasion for maidens, through their dancing skills, to win husbands. But more than that, it is the democratic platform for them to participate in the community's affairs, because the winner of the dance contest represents the social group in the Baale's Council, as she is crowned the priestess. Through the office of the priestess, female youths channel their opinions and demands to the local assembly Iyeneri, the incumbent priestess, has however circumvented this practice over time. She has reduced the festival to an occasion purely for fun and selection of new husbands for maidens. The arbitrary circumvention of the democratic principles embedded in the festival form the crux of the play's conflict. The despotic order represented by Iyeneri has bottled so much creative energy and turned the community in to a land of misery in the mist of so much vitality, to paraphrase Ayoka (YYDC, 30) A return to its democratic origin is expected to loosen and channel the energy toward the advancement of society.

When the empty dark stage comes to life, the anonymous African community is preparing for its annual festival in honour of the river goddess – a divinity who draws her acolytes from the womenfolk. The festival's agenda include a period of cleansing and purification of the environment by women, a period of private or exclusive meditation by the Priestess and a week of peace during which everybody lives in perfect harmony with his neighbour. The night of courtship marks its climax,

featuring dance contest among ladies from three traditional households in the community – Arooroton, Jeosunwon and Mayesoge.

The current celebration faces a threat of disruption from a set of masked youths called Yungba Yungba Dance group. The girls namely Ayoka, Dunbarin and Laboopo are protesting against the decade-old monopolistic hold on priesthood by Iyeneri. They therefore, demand her abdication to allow for a replacement through open contest.

According to the trio, they are not interested in the disruption of the festival per se; rather, they are seeking an end to the arbitrary circumscription of its essence by Iyeneri's usurpation. They want to ensure its proper observation in accordance with the original tradition. They rightly accuse Iyeneri of exploiting primordial clan sensibilities, ignorance, lethargy and anxiety on the part of both young and old women to alter the rules of the festival to her own advantage. The group rallies majority of the women, who have otherwise embraced or tolerated the status quo due to cowardice, complicity or utter indifference behind its open antagonism.

A delegation of six comprising of three Yungba Yungba dancers, Gbemisola, Osingin and Rokeke is selected to present the women's demand before Iyeneri. Unfortunately, when confronted, Iyeneri declines their demand citing historical experiences to justify her perpetuation. To yield to these demands, according to her, is to rekindle the flames of old bitter rivalry which the festival has attracted over the years and which her tenure as the priestess has stemmed. Thus, the stage is set for a

confrontation between the autocratic conservative status quo and democratic change; between the apologists of an oligarchic order and their antagonists.

With the active collaboration of Aro-Orisa, her attendant, Iyeneri schemes to retain her office in perpetuity and at all cost by subverting the successful conduct of the festival. She plots the elimination of Ayoka through spiritual means, playing upon the natural ambition of individual contestants and the primordial cleavages among the three households in a bid to provoke violent confrontation among the contestants. The purpose is to rupture the festival's harmony so that she can intervene like the Greek "deus - ex - machina". The unrest will be used to re-affirm the people's unreadiness for positive change and empowerment, suspend the competition in order to avert further anarchy and hold on to power, thus keeping the movement towards democracy in abeyance. And true to her calculation, members of the three households suddenly rediscover their old animosity. To ensure the victory of their representatives in the contest, each household resorts to "behind the scene" arrangements. For instance the Jeosunwon intend to bribe the judge to sway verdict in favour of their candidate. Each member of the family will be levied to pay what the judges demand as bribe. The Mayesoge plan to spy on their opponents to know their dance patterns. They also intend to plant their members at strategic spots where they can confuse and distract the opponents through abusive songs and itching plants (*werepe*). The Arooroton are playing on the hypnotic effect of juju that Aro-Orisa intends to bury at the dancing arena.

The intrigues and counter-plots among the three households in the battle for the office of the priestess are reminiscent of campaigns for the English crown in the 14th and 15th centuries. The battle pitched the house of York (White Rose) against the house of Lancaster (Red Rose), culminating in the historic Wars of the Roses⁴ between 1445 and 1485.

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However Iyeneri is exposed as the force behind the resurgence of hostility and the envenomed hands behind Ayoka's insanity. The youths insist on driving her away from the shrine. The re-appearance of Ayoka who has hitherto feigned insanity further exposes Iyeneri's plot. Now confronted with the futility of her ruthlessness, she admits her guilt and steps down. Her exit witnesses the flourish of democratic norms as expressed in the transparent dance contest as expressed at the end. Yungba Yungba's logical triumph is accentuated by the extravaganza and carnivalesque atmosphere that takes over the entire theatre (both the stage and the auditorium) in the epilogue.

In this hypothetical community, genuine dance competition - the adopted trope for democratic experiment - is restored. Thus, the community rises above division and social paralysis to regain its equilibrium. Though staged in accordance with its original laws, the competition is now modified in a manner that blends modernity with tradition. Elements of modern beauty pageant where women are judged for physical and intellectual attractiveness are mixed with those of traditional maiden dance in African festivals. The indigenous paradigm presented in the plot too show democratic values inherent in the traditional pre-colonial mode of governance which modern democratic experiments can explore, taking cognisance of each nation's local dynamics, historical peculiarities as well as the essential constituents of democracy.

Hence, *Yungba Yungba* demonstrates how indigenous artistic resources can be enlisted in the propagation of the ideals of democracy.

As a “parable” of contemporary politics, the play begins with Aperin’s story of Song, Drum and Dance (icons of harmony in traditional performance aesthetics) and ends with the same story. The story is suspended in the prologue to enhance suspense. However, the manner of its conclusion in the denouement is significant. Rather than being narrated by a single individual (Aperin) who in a way shares in the personalised rule of Iyeneri, the story is re-narrated and jointly rendered by her and Yungba Yungba girls with the crowd of women on stage and the audience participating in the refrain. This emphasises the import of collectivity in the quest for democracy.

Yungba Yungba adopts a structure close to the indigenous oral narrative especially folk tales of the Yoruba. A folk tale proceeds with the presentation of a universe where characters are initially brought together in a harmonious relationship. This order is violated by characters’ moral weaknesses expressed through over ambition, greed, selfishness or disobedience to higher authorities who constitute social stabilising forces. But at the end, the character who endangers social harmony is punished and the society regains its equipoise. The raconteur concludes by highlighting moral lessons of the tale.

Apart from its structural import, story telling as a technique used in the play affords the audience the opportunity to abstract their own conclusions from the narrated events. The emphasis is on social relevance, so as to, according to Brecht,

“put living reality in the hands of living people in such a way that it can be mastered” (Willet, 109). This fundamental objective underlies the play itself as a narrative.

Aperin, the interpreter at the shrine, is a propelling force behind the play’s narrative paradigm. She is a versatile raconteur who at the slightest prompting will emerge with a suitable anecdote to buttress the message of the moment. Hers is a character with foundation in both epical tradition of Brecht and indigenous African oral tradition, though she leans more towards the latter. She registers, right from the prologue, the narrative architectonics of the play as she is led through the auditorium to the empty dark stage in a follow spot that marks her and her mission out for attention. The empty stage symbolises a clean slate upon which Osofisan is to inscribe his intervention in the discourse of democracy. The slate here is the audience’s mind, which he hopes to stir into a new level of consciousness by his theatrical, nay fictive negotiation of contemporary African history. It is strategic that Aperin establishes a rapport with the audience and secures their participation as the remaining part of the play subsists on this mechanism.

APERIN: . . . And, since we are all in a festive mood, perhaps we should pass the time by telling stories? You know me, I simply relish them, these tales our foremothers used to tell! Well, after all, this is a season of stories, and I am sure you have all come prepared! So, who will start? Who? Don’t be shy now! All right, all right, I will start as one of your hostesses. And then, after me, it will be the turn of one of you! Agreed? ... (YYDC, xvii).

This is a familiar prefatory tune in the moonlight night story-telling session in Africa. It makes the events about to be dramatised credible, as if the spectators have been part of the communal pool of experience from where she is extracting the current narrative.

When examined closely, there are two types of narration. The first is the play itself as a dramatic story. It narrates the struggle of a new generation for self-emancipation and freedom from despotic politics. The second narration includes allusive and digressional anecdotes sourced from folk tale and Ifa divination corpus. For example, “The Story of Stomach and the Limbs” (50-53), “The Story of the Tortoise and the Antelope” (82-86), “The Story of Song, Drum and Dance” (109-118) and the aborted allegorical story of “Cunning, Compassion and Politics” (38). The content and style of these stories expose the limitations of dictatorship represented by Iyeneri and sometime provide models for democratisation. Each of them has ethos of democratic governance for the audience to imbibe.

“The Story of Stomach and the Limbs” narrated by Aperin underscores the imbalance in the socio-economic and political structure in the community. It does this through its “umpire” theory of government and its principle of “inviolability of the sovereign” reminiscent of the idea of the French political philosopher-Jean Jacques Rousseau. The story is about how rivalry and lack of co-operation stirred by Laaroye sever the unity between the stomach, the gullet and the two limbs. All of them suffer the consequences of disunity. This story is similar to the one narrated to the Roman plebeians by Menenius Agrippa in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* (1:1, 11. 95-145). As its

moral principle, the story advocates an acceptance of social inequality without question as the path to social harmony and development. While recognising individual's rights, the story ends up in propping up conservatism, social stratification, inequality and the futility of struggle:

They heard those words, and then they understood
 How we each have our role, and must walk the road
 Of our destiny! That, like fingers, men
 Must learn to live unequal as they're born:
 For rebellion is brief and vain:
 They last who do not complain! (YYDC, 53).

The rhetorical structure and content of this story shows that it is derived from Ifa divination corpus⁵, but the way it is rendered here, it makes critical pronouncements on leadership and power relation in societies. It illustrates in a way, the political theory of Rousseau articulated in *The Social Contract*. According to Rousseau, each citizen in the social contract subordinates his person, his force, rights and power to the general will. The subordination engenders a corporate body called the State or the Republic. Each member by virtue of his citizenship shares in the authority of the sovereign, yet, he is subject to its laws.

In the "Story of Stomach and Limbs", each part of the human anatomy are members of the republic. The sovereign authority is the stomach. By harping on the futility of rebellion, the story is told by Aperin in support of the conservative status quo and to blunt revolt gradually brewing among the women. The story's argument favours individual rule. Perhaps, this account for its unpopularity, judging from the cold reception it gets from the listeners.

The reaction contrasts with the hearty laughter that attends the conclusion of the other two stories. The story is also textually set apart from the others by the fact that on the printed page, it is italicised and it is the only story rendered in this manner. Besides, Aperin narrates it while others merely join in the refrain in order to buttress the passivity and inequality that the story conveys.

The mode of narration in the above contrasts with that of "The Antelope and the Tortoise", jointly narrated by Mayesoge girls i.e. Ponju, Modoyin, Iyabo, Okiki and Osingin. The cunning Tortoise is pitched against the conceited Antelope. The Tortoise decides to take up the gauntlet thrown by the Antelope to determine the faster runner between the duo. In spite of the swift and dazzling speed of the Antelope the race ends in favour of the slow, ambling but cunning Tortoise who places his dressed-alike siblings at every leg in the race.

The story illustrates real politik of the old order that has resurfaced in the community. Expedience rather than morals or principles determines people's course of action. Politics here is devoid of scruples a pitfall, which the playwright believes that an aspiring democracy like Nigeria must avoid.

The concluding story - "The Story of Song, Drum and Dance" is an allegorical celebration of euphony and harmony. It is collectively narrated by the Yungba Yungba group, Laboopo, Dunbarin, Gbemisola and now with Aperin, to show reconciliation and unity already achieved between the new generation weaned on democratic values and the remnant of the old regime. Song, Drum and Dance are personified as maidens

in line with the exclusively feminine composition of *Yungba Yungba* dramatis personae. In summary, Story-telling is a vital rhetorical and performative element in the play. It is also an important thematic construct, which calls attention to the overriding idiom of solidarity and collectivity.

Dance is a part of the larger artistic idiom that shapes Osofisan's concept of popular drama, its nature and its social function. This is evident not only in *Yungba Yungba* but also in his other plays. Dance is a vital component of Africans' ritual experience through which they seek order and meaning to a naturally disorderly universe. In *Yungba Yungba*, dance is not only a means of achieving emotional distancing, but also a mechanism for thematic reinforcement. The play opens (and ends) with dance in order to adumbrate the centrality of dance in its polemics and aesthetics. It expresses socio-political cleavages and contributes to the final harmonious resolution.

Besides, dance in the play is a medium of political choice. It is a barometre for measuring popularity and a means of recruiting leaders. It is a trope for democratic competition for power. In the estimation of the community, the keen sense of order, discipline, determination and endurance expected to be invested by the would-be winner of the dance contest are required elements of statecraft. The competing dance groups- Arooroton, Jeosunwon and Mayesoge represent political parties in a multi party democratic system. The three groups in a way are metaphorical representation of the tripartite geo-political affiliations in the structuring of party system during the First

Republic⁶. The primordial antagonisms between the three families are registered with dance right from the start of the play. Each house lays claim to indisputable supremacy in the arts of dancing and singing. Thus, the audience is introduced to a bitter struggle for power at all cost in a dance competition so beset with hostility and acrimony- a game where losers are “brutally pushed aside, without a voice, without a right to even demand their dues...” (YYDC, 44).

The families demonstrate the perversion of electoral processes, which led to the demise of the previous democratic experiments in Nigeria. The competition for power in the community becomes fierce because of the flawed philosophy of the State. Whereas, the State is supposed to be an arena of social intercourse where citizens are given opportunities to fully and appropriately channel their potentials, in post-independence politics, the State is more appropriative just as Iyeneri's era is. This appropriatory dimension has made public office attractive and keenly competitive. As Osofisan remarks in “What will you do on Democracy Day?”

The postcolonial state in Africa is an arena of booty distribution and each office holder is to go there and bring back home the community's share or that the state is an enemy which must be raided and dispossessed of its resources and plundered (10).

Consequently, none of the traditional households would want to leave anything to chances in the preparation for the dance contest.

Each dancer is full of contempt for her would-be rivals from other households and each house is full of self-glorification for itself. But when one cast apart this

denigration of opponent and self-glorification, one perceives the unpleasant nature of electioneering in Nigeria, usually marred by violence, corruption and deceit. It is the political upheaval among the households as indicated above that the Yungba Yungba dance group; the harbinger of a new democratic order has come to terminate. Theirs is a unifying and conciliatory dance crusade, so that when the dance competition finally takes place, it is no more a divisive albatross. Through the metaphor of dance, therefore, the playwright re-presents the triumph of democracy over socio-political segmentation, diatribe and violence.

Another noteworthy artistic element is song through which the households articulate their self-celebration. But at the intervention of the Yungba Yungba, denigrative songs are giving way to refrains of unity. For instance, Ayoka's song, picked up by others stresses the ethos of sharing in public life:

Tiwa ni o, tiwa ni:
 Tiwa ni o, tiwa ni:
 Oro iselu yoi-tiwani
 Ko seni ti ko tosi –Tiwa ni:
 Ogbon ko jogbon lo-Tiwa ni
 Oro ominra ni- Tiwa ni

It's for us, and it's ours:
 This business of politics – it's for us'
 There's none it doesn't concern -
 It's for us!
 Nobody's wisdom surpasses the others
 It's all about freedom – it's for us! ---
 (YYDC, 27).

In the manner of production, songs and music in the play reinforce social synergy as a political vision. It is different from what obtains in the classical Aristotelian drama in which the chorus or orchestra is a separate entity, set apart from the stage action. In *Yungba Yungba*, songs and music are supplied not by an orchestra

separated from the plot, but by the entire community in the universe of the play, including the audience. This participatory mechanism is a deliberate choice by the playwright for its congruence with democratic practice.

From textual evidence, *Yungba Yungba* is set in a fictional anonymous African community where (neo) colonial presence has not eclipsed traditional and cultural practices. Specifically, the community can be located among the Yoruba in the western part of Nigeria. The cult of the river goddess, the fusion of artistic and political responsibilities, the idea of annual purification festivals and its attendant politico-spiritual obligations are familiar practices in Yoruba land. But the fact that the community is unnamed implies that the thrust of the play's advocacy for democracy is applicable to most parts of the African continent.

Osofisan explores symbolism in the arrangement of the mis-en-scene. According to the stage instruction, all the actions take place in "the open space between the traditional market of wooden stalls and counters, and the river leading to the shrine of the water goddess". (*YYDC*, viii). The shrine represents the ideal, perfect order while the stream and the market symbolise the loci of existential struggle or daily reality of the people. The open space between them is an arena of free socio-economic interaction, which necessitates the art of politics. But in Yoruba cosmology, these places are conferred with essence and existence.

The market place in Yoruba traditional society is a space of free and open economic interrelationship between human, sub-human and super-human beings⁷.

Perhaps, this reality makes Iyeneri to resort to the spirit of the market to arrest the sanity of Ayoka and truncate the nascent revolt of younger generation against her despotic era.

The market is a popular arena with a recognisable power structure headed by the Oloja or Iyaloja – the leading merchant. Beyond its economic import, it is a political space with its own pattern of interaction and power imbrications. Here is an open public sphere that serves as an imagistic reinforcement of the transparency and freedom aspirations of democracy embedded in the play's polemics. Apart from this, the market serves as a setting for Osofisan to inscribe his vision of empowerment of the common people. It is a place where the dispossessed, petty traders, peasants and the downtrodden with whom the playwright is in obvious solidarity throng. Though historical forces have pushed them to the margin of authority and socio-economic power, Osofisan carves for them, a centre through the play in the trope of the market.

The market trope is complemented by the composition of the dramatis personae, which is basically feminine. Women in agrarian African societies largely do trading activities in the market while men are away on the farm cultivating. Catherine Acholonu has observed that “women form a great percentage of the merchant population in African towns and cities. Infact, marketing is a traditional domain of the African women” (43).

The cult of the water goddess also draws its acolyte from womenfolk. The locus of action here is the space between the rarefied mythico-religious essence of the river that houses the shrine of the goddess and the everyday economic relations of the market.

Characterisation in the play celebrates the virtues of collective struggle in a programme of transition to democracy, and also stresses the alignment of the play's aesthetics with the hitherto "de-powered" and "oppressed" majority. In the construction of conflicts and in the patterning of characters' inter-relations around these conflicts, Osofisan demonstrates a strong preference for the group. To wit, the individual is secondary in import to the social group. Individuals' actions are determined by, or evaluated in relation to their promotion of collective aspirations. One element in Osofisan's dramaturgy that is illustrated in *Yungba Yungba* is that the dramatised social struggle is not modelled around a single dominant personality called the hero (or heroine). It rather revolves around a coalition – Yungba Yungba. The group gets broadened in the course of the play. Apart from this, social relations and structures of power instead of fate or immutable divine will motivate characters' actions and behaviour.

None of the characters is roundly developed within the scope of the drama to warrant her heroisation in the manner of a pro-classical play. Not even Ayoka, the spearhead of the youths' agitation. The play parades mono-dimensional characters, who are credited with a single dominant trait, but are important for their social affiliations. Though this trait is changeable, what is not compromised is the need to stir

the audience into a new awareness of the inherent contradictions in the reigning political system with a view to making them embrace practical action towards change.

Osofisan adopts a materialist stance in the creation of characters. Even when they are seemingly endowed with supernatural powers like Iyeneri and Aro-orisa, such characters are sooner shorn of their eerie garb. Sometimes, they are deliberately subverted as witnessed in Iyeneri's plan to induce insanity in Ayoka through the active collaboration of Aro-orisa.

Before further elaboration on the foregoing, it is pertinent to make some observations concerning the gender factor in the composition of the play's dramatis personae. The cast list is entirely made up of women. And within the text, there are efforts to emphasise the exclusively feminine out look. For instance, Aperin declares in the prologue that she relishes "these tales our 'foremothers' used to tell" (YYDC, xvii) instead of our "forefathers". Apart from that, Song, Drum and Dance are presented in her story as "sisters" who have Felicity as their mothers. There are no details about their father.

The gender factor in the play is secondary and need not occlude the substantive political issue in focus, that is, widening of the democratic space and empowerment of the majority of the people in an authoritarian polity. A purely sexist reading of the play is somewhat vitiated by the fact that women are presented as a group experiencing intra-gender struggle for power. They are not pitched against the menfolk in the usual conflicting or competitive interaction, which is a familiar praxis

in gender aesthetics. The struggle for power in *Yungba Yungba* is not between the domineering male on the one hand and dispossessed womenfolk. (There will be more on the gynocentric theatrical discourse in the next chapter). The conflict is between Iyeneri the usurper and the majority of the women who are hitherto denied their freedom of choice, consent and by extension participation in public affairs. It follows that if there is a reversal of the *dramatis personae*, and the entire cast list features men, such reversal will not affect the tenor of the play's polemics in the quest for democracy.

Iyeneri represents one end of the political polarity. At the other end are Ayoka and other Yungba Yungba girls. Whereas, at the beginning, the balance of power is tilted in Iyeneri's favour, this is reversed in the denouement with a clear triumph for the majority as dramatised in the dance contest and carnival of the epilogue. So, the play's political concern obviously transcends gender predilection.

In Iyeneri, Osofisan creates an arrogant and swaggering despot. This is reinforced by her initial tendency to speak of herself in the nominative case – "We" (i.e. first person plural pronoun). Though this is a syntactical and lexical possibility in Yoruba language, it smacks of arrogance and exaggerated sense of her importance and worth.

In another vein, Iyeneri typifies the 'sit – tight' or self-perpetuation – in – power at all cost; a common tendency among post - independence African leaders both civilians and military.⁸ She becomes a priestess through her victory in the annual maiden dance competition. But the lures of power and acrimonious division among the competing

households impel her to retain the post for ten years (the tenure of ten priestesses instead of one).

Iyeneri is skilled in the art of real politik, that type of politics motivated by her immediate needs rather than by principles or moral propriety. As she declares to the rebelling Yungba Yungba girls “this is politics, and you are novices in the game. With time you too will discover that the struggle for power, for the control of it, is older in our compounds than what you call by the name of compassion” (YYDC, 38). Consequently, she seeks to eliminate Ayoka the driving force of the rebellion in order to fracture the democratic quest. Her strategy in this wise is familiarly akin to that of tyrants in fiction and in history. She somehow shares the vile attributes of Niccolo Machiavelli’s prince in *The Prince* (1573). The overriding motive for Machiavelli’s Prince is summed up in the epigram: “the end justifies the means”. He is a heartless, brutal, vicious, ruthless, crafty and scheming ruler of a city-state. Osofisan drives home the logic of Iyeneri’s tyrannic disposition through her inevitable deposition by social forces coalesced under Yungba Yungba. Like a tyrant, she is consumed by social contradictions thrown up by her monopoly of power. Otherwise, why must she activate primordial cleavages and promote chaos during the peace week?

However, as obtained in traditional societies, there is usually a mechanism for redress, to purge the transgressor of his or her malfeasance. Soyinka’s remark in *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness* supports this assertion:

Most African traditional societies have established modalities that guarantee the restoration of harmony after serious infractions (13).

Consequently, Iyeneri pays for the pollution of the sacred peace week with her compelled abdication. She paves the way for a return to democratic ways of old. The winner of the contest will now enjoy her victory to its fullest. She will preside over the next contest, marry the most handsome man and succeed Iyeneri at the shrine as the priestess. She will also represent the youths in the assembly of the Baale, among the lawmakers.

Iyeneri's character is therefore, remarkable for its didactic and artistic import. Her political humiliation signposts the fate that awaits regimes with similar despotic traits in Africa. The play in a way calls on them to abdicate, follow the example of Iyeneri, bow to the agitation of the people for democratic governance and allow the enthronement of "a new generation with a vibrant and restorative ideology" (YYDC , xv).

Using the dialectical stance of epic theatre, Iyeneri is made to re-present polemics favourable to military intervention in politics. She gives a familiar argument of coup plotters to justify the termination of a "failed" or "failing" democracy. According to her, she intervenes at a critical juncture in the community's history when the fun and relief which the dance competition is supposed to generate turns to feud and grief. This intervention parallels that of the military in politics, which is usually

anchored on the collapse of the democratic process especially electioneering. She candidly presents her position in the following series of rhetorical questions:

IYENERI: ... Those competitions you shout so much about!
 What do you know about them? What have you learnt?
 Did your tutors tell you of how bitter, and how violent they had become? ... Did they tell you about that? Of how the eventual winners then used their victories as a weapon to punish and humiliate their opponents? And how the smaller families were brutally pushed aside, without a voice, without a right to even demand their dues? (YYDC, 44).

From the above, it is clear that the political competition in the community (Dance competition) has become a winner-takes-all game. The minorities (smaller families) are denied their say contrary to democratic principle. The friction and tension that such a scenario inevitably generates warrant arbitrary interventionist efforts like Iyeneri's. However, the intervention especially when prolonged does not go without its own limitations especially in terms of manipulation of popular will and abridgement of civil liberties through repression.

The play while recognising the restorative thesis of authoritarian regimes, presents its limitations as Iyeneri's self-perpetuation has vitiated her initial patriotic fervour. She is now obsessed with power. Of course, characters like Aperin and Aro-Orisa, her attendants, facilitate her obsession with power.

Aperin is the interpreter at the cult of the river goddess while Aro-Orisa is a herbalist, a member of the Osugbo cult and a confidant of Iyeneri. She is like the royal bard or court poet in traditional African societies who is versed in saws, tales, legends,

proverbs and other elements of ancient wisdom. In this regard, Aperin sometimes encourages the exaggerated self-valuation of Iyeneri, making her (Iyeneri) to believe in her own indispensability through her chantings. As the mirror through which the priestess is to assess herself, Aperin reflects a providential image:

APERIN: (chanting)

... Yeye is out walking
 And all the good things of life
 Are gathered here in her basket:
 Let them come, who wish for blessing... (YYDC, 35).

She also achieves this through her narration of "The Story of the Stomach and the Limbs" which endorses the status quo under Iyeneri and attempts to blunt the will to question her authority.

In order to preserve her job, Aperin withdraws into convenient silence or exigent neutrality. She declines to partake in the challenge of Iyeneri's usurpation championed by Yungba Yungba girls. She declares:

... on this particular subject, I have no opinion at all!
 Iyeneri is the voice of the river goddess herself, the
 first and the last word on everything! Besides, my
 friends, she pays my salary! What! The rat may not
 speak the language of cats, but she understands
 enough to stay in the farthest corner of her hole
 when cats are meeting! (YYDC, 40).

Her policy of non-interference is however, provisional. At a point, she becomes an aperture through whom the priestess gazes into the mind of the people to know their popular wishes. She urges Iyeneri to quit power as demanded by the youths, contrary

to the self-serving admonition of Aro-Orisa. Iyeneri ignores Aperin's exhortation and strives to further concretise her dominance of power and economic gains attached to the office of the priestess, in league with Aro-Orisa. Actually, Aperin exhibits a correct grasp of Iyeneri's character, which she articulates during the latter's moment of recognition.

IYENERI: Aperin! You betrayed me!

APERIN: Not me, Yeye! It was power that betrayed you! You held it for too long, you allowed it to kill your humanity! You would keep it at all costs! You were even ready to defile your own peace week! (YYDC, 104)

On the other side of the polar are the Yungba Yungba girls and their teeming converts who register the aesthetic vision of the playwright concerning the ascendancy of the collective in power configuration. It is the coalition that is invested with heroic attributes. Although Ayoka appears to be at the centre of the popular resistance, her temporary absence due to her putative insanity does not prevent the remaining Yungba Yungba from going ahead with the anti-despotism struggle. Though started by Ayoka, Dunbarin and Laboopo, the campaign is gradually consolidated until all, including Iyeneri and Aperin, embrace it.

As part of the internal mechanism of meaning in the play, the characters' designations corroborate their mobilisational role toward a re-configuration of power in the unnamed community. In African societies people's or object's nomenclature have larger implications for their being. It is believed that there is a correlation between a person's character and his or her name. John Mbiti explains this cultural

tendency further when he asserts that “nearly all African names have a meaning...some names describe the personality of the individual or his character, or some key events in his life” (118).

Yungba Yungba is an onomatopoeic connotation of sweetness or pleasure derived, as in this case, from beauty, harmony and peace. The group mediates contradictions in the polity, which have largely sustained Iyeneri in power against the wishes of the generality of the people. They are masked symbols of collective aspiration for order, equality and stability. Expectedly, they succeed in restoring the democratic rights of the people and its attendant gains already noted above. Yungba Yungba is arguably, an effort to build bridges across the limits of partisanship, ethno-nationalism, linguistic, religious and cultural differences.

It is not fortuitous that Yungba Yungba is originally made up of Ayoka, Laboopo and Dunbarin. “Ayoka” is a Yoruba female cognomen that means “Overwhelming happiness” or “all-embracing celebration”, which is envisioned in the outcome of the group’s struggle for a return to open, free, fair and objective competition. “Laboopo” means “honour/wealth restored”. There is also a struggle for the restoration of prosperity, which has been lacking due to economic adversity experienced under Iyeneri’s regime. “Dunbarin” stands for “ a good and reliable companion”. This implies that the struggle for popular participation in governance is a dependable route to socio-economic development.

In the choice of characters, the play explores cultural symbols. Yungba Yungba is made up of three characters named above. When they are to confront Iyeneri with her misdeeds, three other girls are added: Gbemisola, Osingin and Rokeke. Each of them represents the three traditional households in the community. Three is a significant figure in Yoruba numeracy. It, among other things, expresses unity. As the saying goes: "Aaro meta, kii d' obe nu" (literally it means that whatever is well set or balanced can stand the test of time). The founding Yungba Yungba constitute the steady tripod upon which the community's quest for harmony, stability and progress rests. When three other girls join them, they become six, a perfect number expressing unity, love and solidarity. These are required values in a democratic social formation.

The crux of Yungba Yungba campaign is that "the old order must change, that things can no longer stand still" as something new is being born (YYDC, 32). To them, tyranny festers amidst division, rivalry and untempered ambition. In the words of Ayoka, "a tyrant triumphs only on our own errors" (108). Interestingly, they exemplify the altruistic motivations of many social engineers in the history of struggle, who are usually not the beneficiaries of their efforts. Though Ayoka, Dunbarin and Laboopo are not members of the competing households, they champion a course of freedom from which the society ultimately benefits. And when the competition is to take place, they are seen among the women "arranging seats, buntings and other decorations" (YYDC, 119). They are still part of the collective rather than being

celebrated as heroes. Apart from this, they ignore the divisive submission of Mama Ayoka who opposes her daughter's participation in the anti-authoritarian crusade. They equally eschew the tendency to pursue victory at all cost like members of the three households.

To buttress their different orientation from the old order, the Yungba Yungba girls are exposed to Western education. But curiously, it is not only their knowledge from formal school instruction that shapes their radicalism. Osofisan shows this as a product of their proper distillation of the indigenous socialisation process, which includes folk narratives, and other cultural means of edification.

* * * *

Several attempts have been made by Nigerian playwrights to tackle the problems of how English can assume the role of an effective medium of communication on stage. From the experimentation with pidgin by Tunde Fatunde in *Oga Na tief Man* and Zulu Sofola in *The Wizard of Law*, to the use of code-mixing as it is ingeniously explored in Rotimi's *If...* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*, the aim is to make a putative "foreign" language communicate to as many members of the populace as possible. One therefore, encounters in *Yungba Yungba*, as in some other plays by Osofisan, an attempt by the playwright to accommodate the challenges posed by English – a language accessible to about thirty percent of the general population.

One aspect of Osofisan's language experimentation is the use of simple and accessible linguistic registers, within the rhetorical codes of popular theatre.

This involves the use of familiar mode of daily conversation and popular idiolect of the market place, complete with its banter, free exchange of abuse, praise, greeting and humour. He also resorts to code mixing. This involves the conflation of lexical items from the superstrate language (English) and substrate language (Yoruba). There is a deliberate verbal intrusion of Yoruba expressions into English, but this intrusion rather than obstructing signification actually enhances it. Besides, the experiment confers a measure of verisimilitude on the action to which the language serves as a vehicle of communication. For example, when the play begins, Iyaloja arrives the market and meets the girls wrapped up in dancing and singing.

IYALOJA: *Howu! Howu!*
 Mayesoge! Children of Mayesoge!
 GIRLS: Good morning, Iyaloja, *Iya wa!*
 IYALOJA: Good morning, *hoowu!* Why not wait? (YYDC, 4)

These words are italicised in order to acknowledge their intrusion. However, “hoowu” is a Yoruba phonoaesthetic word indicating surprise. It is repeated here to enable Iyaloja secure the attention of the girls. This expression makes the situation realistic in a way that an English equivalent, if there is any, may not be able to communicate. Surprise is a serious emotional matter, which is better expressed in Iyaloja’s first language in this case. Confronted with the same experiment by Zulu Sofola in *The Wizard of Law*, Segun Adekoya remarks, “The mother tongue is used to express a deep felt joy or pain that rids humanity of its disguises. It is the easiest and most

natural language. Using a second language could be likened to wearing a mask or pretending to be learned” (65).

Below is another example:

MA RONKE: *O to-oo-oo*. Enough, enough! Let’s have
some peace, *o ja re!* (YYDC, 10).

“O to-oo-oo” means, “it is enough”. The Arooroton family uses “O jare” for emphasis and to register the speaker’s displeasure about the self-celebration and the hypnotic entertainment. “O to-oo-oo” is a rhetorical method of calling attention and registering transition in the subject and mood. It is an acceptable rhetorical device often used by traditional artistes of poetic genres like *Ijala*, *Rara* and *Esa egungun*. They employ it in the context of performance to wrest the baton of chants from one another. The efficacy of this rhetorical element becomes clear when immediately after signalling her intervention, “the dance dissolves, like the first, amidst great merriment and laughter” (10). Other examples of such emphatic phrases include:

“Abi”? (Isn’t it true, 5)

“Kare! Kare e e! O Sure” (well done, you have done well, 7).

“O ma se o” (it is a pity, 14)

Combined with all these is the use of proverbs. Proverbs in African culture, observes Raji-Oyelade, “are repository and verbal effulgence of wisdom” (74). In *Yungba Yungba*, Iyeneri herself underscores the rhetorical import of proverbs when she declares: “These saws are the normal spice of dialogue” (YYDC, 36). For example:

IYALOJA: ... When the old iroko feels the first signs of stiffening in its joints, it leaves the rest of the dance to its saplings! (YYDC, 33)

Through the proverb, she expresses her endorsement of the youths call for a new order. Aperin warns of the consequence of disregarding the increasing wave of agitation for a new order by the youths thus: "If we refuse to heed the warning of thunder, then we should be prepared to be beaten by rain!" (YYDC, 59).

However, whereas saws and proverbs are usually associated with age and wisdom, it is not confined to the older generation. Granted that the youths acknowledge the superiority of their elders in terms of ancient wisdom, the youths are also versed in the philosophical and ingenious mechanism of proverbs, hence, their unmistakable eligibility to step into the centre of power in a new democratic dispensation, when the old despotic regime is replaced.

GBEMI ... Let us show these upstarts that the pounded yam may strut now and boast of being the queen of the lunch table, but she was first moulded and taught her manners in the womb of the mortar! (YYDC, 6).

MOSUN. It is only the newborn cat that the rat can fondle and address as "my comrade"! When the cat grows older, no one will teach the rat to pay respects! (YYDC, 18)

The youths are imbued with critical minds. They hesitate to accept unquestioningly, received ancient tradition. Sometimes, they distort these witty sayings or render them in a manner that reflects their critical spirit.

In striving after accessibility, Osofisan sometimes resort to literal translation of Yoruba words into English: as evident in the following lamentation of Mama Ayoka over the uncertain fate of her “missing” daughter, Ayoka:

MA AYOKA: ... ah, since yesterday! Since yesterday!
 What kind of head did I bring to this world?
 (*Iru ori wo ni mo gbe waye yii?*).
 ...But it's my head, the horrible head I brought to
 this world”... (YYDC, 73).
 (*Sugbon ori mi ni, ori buruku ti mo gbe waye*).

Here, “head” is not the physical stem of eyes, mouth, nose, ears and the seat of intelligence. It refers to “ori”, the repository of personal being and the summation of a person’s fate. It is an emblem of determinism, implying that whatever happens to man on earth has been predetermined prior to existence by higher beings. (Idowu, 1964; Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979, 158-64).

The last discursive element in the dramatisation of contest for power is the use of abuse or invective. In Yoruba culture, invective is an art with its own compositional mechanism. It finds expression in inter-personal interaction in private life or public sphere. It is also used in poetic modes like *Ijala*, *Esa*, *Awerende*, *Etiyeri* and *Orin aremolekun* (lullaby). It has been explored in many other Nigerian drama.⁹

The manner of the usage of abuse in the play reminds one of quarrels among women in a typical polygamous household. It is not a rhetorical choice out of place, judging from the fact that what is being contested by the parties involved is power and

its attendant socio-economic and political benefits. Besides, the use of invective facilitates the creation of tension and altercation that often mark social interaction in the market place. Adebayo Faleti sheds more light on the functionality of invective in Yoruba culture:

Abusive words, tirades, sarcasm and invective(s) of all kinds are a daily occurrence among the Yorubas, especially in market places, among petty traders and hawkers who in most cases are young women and girls, although in very serious cases. It may involve royalty, the nobility, communities and politicians (1).

This verbal art of abuse, accompanied with appropriate gesture and histrionics constitutes a significant part of *Yungba Yugba's* rhetorical elements, especially in the promotion of disintegrative forces and generation of tension in the community. What ordinarily promises to be a peaceful session of dancing and singing between the three households at the opening gradually degenerates into a session of verbal warfare, accompanied with self-valorisation and denigration of the opponents. This art of abuse or invective is important for its own style, pattern of creation and method of delivery.

Below is a song of Arooroton:

E ma pariwo wa
Egbenu da siwaju
E ya fun wa lono
Kafijo hon fomo atiro!

No need to gossip about us
Hold your tongue in check
Just clear the way,
Let's teach these cripples how to dance!

(YYDC, 8)

Expectedly, there is a response in kind from Ma Ronke of the Jeosunwon family which also provokes further tirade. Each family has abusive songs that it reacts violently to, especially when such songs are accompanied with gestures like contemptuous flattening of the lips, hissing and mimicry.

From this denigration of opponent and praise of self, Osofisan presents previous politicking as a ferocious battle that is usually fought and won at all cost. But the scenario of overwhelming chaos facilitated by the use of abuse provides a converse reality against which the audience can measure the import and merits of democracy as an institutional framework for negotiating difference when it is finally restored in the epilogue.

In summary, *Yungba Yungba* negotiates a pan-African problem – the challenges of democratisation - through a conflation of aesthetic praxis of traditional African communal theatre and Brechtian epic theatre. Appropriate discursive elements from the traditional and epic substructure of this option are used to stir the audience into a new awareness of the need to urgently replace personalised rule with democratic governance across the continent. The play through its unnamed, and as such universal community creates a model of collective struggle against tyranny, and the return of decision-making power to the people where it rightly belongs. In its final realisation, the objective is not catharsis but political critique and social commentary toward a democratic transformation of the polity from its authoritarian configuration.

Awaiting Trouble

The dominant issues in the discourse of Nigerian politics in 1993 when *Awaiting Trouble* was first produced¹⁰ were how to close for all times, the unending cycle of military rule; how to rightly empower the people through a democratic political system; how to “move the country forward” in popular parlance from the political impasse created as a result of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election. This election in general expectation, would have restored democratic civilian government after a decade of military rule.¹¹

The play, therefore examines the socio-economic conditions of existence under the then subsisting military dictatorship with a view to stirring popular revolt against the system and in its place establish a regime of the hoi poloi. The play is marked by its topicality, contemporaneity and its adoption of the dramaturgical codes of trado - epic. It is united with Femi Osofisan’s *Yungba Yungba* in the common pursuit of empowerment of the “masses” and termination of personalised authoritarian rule. As John Alege, the revolutionary avant-garde in *Awaiting Trouble* declares: “We are the people [masses] to whom power rightly belongs”.¹²

Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju belongs to the third generation of Nigerian dramatists¹³ and shares the vision of social change of some dramatists of the second generation like Osofisan and Kole Omotoso, especially their polemical identification with the less privileged class. This is exemplified in the aesthetics of *Awaiting Trouble*. Beneath the play’s structuring of dramatic events is an advocacy of a revolutionary approach to

changing the mode of economic and political relations in the country. The oligarchic order under the military is adjudged as fundamentally unjust as it is based on socio-economic inequality among citizens. Its amorphous economic system can at best be described as pseudo- capitalism, with an underlying ethos of “might is right”. Oloruntoba-Oju’s materialist reading of Nigeria’s politics shows that to end social injustice and ensure economic well being of majority of the citizen, violent revolution against military dictatorship led by the oppressed masses is inevitable.

Awaiting Trouble generates its theatrical discourse from the daily struggle for existence by the economically marginalised, socially oppressed and politically disempowered people. The choice of detainees and inmates of one Nigerian prison – Ikoyi – as paradigms for apprehending the ills of and possible solutions to dictatorship is therefore, appropriate. Through the prison paradigm, the playwright stages a struggle between tyranny and its victims. The living condition in average Nigerian prison is harsh and dehumanising. The prison can be aptly described as a foretaste of Hell.¹⁴

The inmates are largely awaiting trial. But when they come to a true awareness of their harsh condition, they will demand for freedom from their hitherto oppressor. The struggle is bound to be violent because of the firm control of the instrument of coercion and destruction by the gaolers. If and when the revolution takes place and succeeds, trouble awaits their hitherto oppressor as there will be a reversal of power

structure in favour of the currently disempowered. This summation informs the play's title – "Awaiting Trouble".

The manner of depicting the angst of prisoners is as repulsive as what obtains in Soyinka's *From Zia With Love*. However, Olorunjoba-Oju takes a step further with the provision of a palpable practical course of action for a re-arrangement of the polity. Besides, *Awaiting Trouble* also differs from *From Zia With Love* in the sense that the dystopia of its discourse carries along with it, some palliative codes. An alternative socio-political system that will be beneficial to the inmates as well as the larger society, from which the prison is abstracted, is proposed. Consequently, the prisoners here are not "trapped" in a universe where "it will never happen" (i.e. true freedom) as it is in the case of *From Zia With Love*.

The mixtures of traditional performance elements with the alienating techniques of Brechtian epic are evident in *Awaiting Trouble*. However, the play is more self-conscious of its epical leaning when compared with *Yungba Yungba*. Besides, while the latter advances a negotiated termination of authoritarian rule through dialogue, the former opts for a democratic change effected through violent struggle. The play posits that violent confrontation rather than peaceful conversation between forces of absolutism and their victims is the most viable vehicle to change. Alege, the propeller of this change strikes the point when he declares:

Even as I moved slowly into the dock,
I knew only one path could lead to the truth
of life, and that is the path of collision.
Nothing but collision, against those who spawn

falsehood and keep humanity in strife (AT, 41).

Oloruntoba-Oju seems to share the liberational vision of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who admonishes the contemporary African writer in *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* to "depict reality in its revolutionary transformation from the standpoint of the people – The agents of change" (73).

A critical study of *Awaiting Trouble* shows that there is a displacement of individualist messianic representation as found in some previous Nigerian drama by an art that promotes collective struggle toward the same goal of social redemption. Thus, the individualist carrier paradigm, usually encountered in classical and quasi-classical drama is subordinated to the archetypal collective in the play's redemptive ideation. An abiding faith in the ability of men to re-order their universe and the ideological need for an optimistic rendering of social experience against the backdrop of a repressive military regime are part of this ideation. It may not be surprising when the playwright, like a literary deus-ex-machina, imposes a more bearable resolution on the gloomy denouement which logically arises from pervasive social injustice. But the question that naturally follows is that why should the putative optimistic end carry so strong a scent of tragedy especially with the death of Alege? The answer is that the quest for freedom and democracy is an endless process and that the end of Alege is certainly not the end of the struggle. In fact, it is the beginning of a new order in which the oppressed have earned their much-desired freedom and are now left with the challenges of managing it.

Quite central to the play's dramatic devices is its setting in a prison. Through the metaphor of the prison, Oloruntoba-Oju harmonises the focus of his artistic creation with the general struggle against dictatorship. Somehow, the struggle by the inmates to break free from the sub-human conditions of the prison parallels the agitation by Nigerians for democratic freedom during the military era. The prison is a "bounded" site apt for representing a "closed state" that Nigeria became under the post-Second Republic military regimes especially from 1984 to 1998. In this state, the quest for freedom and rehumanisation is at the centre of social struggle.

The "closed" state as Adebayo Williams has noted, is a state that combines the characteristics of "kleptocracy" with "those of absolute despotism". As he further elaborates:

It is a state which has been seized by a clique for the benefit of a clique. Hermetically sealed from the larger realities of the territory it has hijacked, the closed state cannot be institutionally reformed from within or without because it has blocked off either by force or other means at its disposal, even other factions within the larger dominant class. In effect, it is a state which can neither develop itself nor the nation, and whose malignant group can only be weakened by force or long-term decay and atrophy (118).

The experiences of inmates of Ikoyi prison in *Awaiting Trouble* who are drawn from diverse economic, political and ethno-national backgrounds succinctly depict the deprivation, domination and discrimination often suffered by citizens of the "closed state". As Oloruntoba-Oju discloses in an interview, the prison seems to be "the perfect analogy for deprivation and for injustice. That is where we usually have the

dregs of the society, precisely those people who are mostly victims of the injustice of the society...people who have reached the rock-bottom, such that it is a Herculean task to give hope to such people because even when they get out of prison, they are ostracised" (Appendix B).

The prison is an institution where dictatorship psychologically and spiritually breaks its perceived opponents and holds their non-conformity in check. It is also part of the larger framework to resist change and ensure hegemonic preservation. The prison is part of the punitive restitutive mechanism that human societies have developed over the ages. In the play, the nature of the prison says a lot about the type of politics obtainable in the country, as the prison re-directs the audience's attention to the imperfection in the judicial system and by extension, the politics. It raises pertinent questions about social inequality and economic injustice.

Ordinarily, the penal system of which the prison is a part is supposed to be guided by reformatory principles. The system is to ensure the moral rehabilitation of those who err against the law before their re-admission into the society at the end of the jail term. The success of such a penal system is measured by the reduction in crime wave, number of criminals and the readiness of its product for positive reintegration into the society. Available statistics have shown the failure of the penal system in Nigeria during the period under focus.¹⁵ *Awaiting Trouble*, through its exploration of the failure of the penal system, makes a case for a radical overhaul of the society's power structure and its re-composition in favour of the oppressed class.

In the play, the prison is like a mechanism for cruel punishment through which the state extracts its vengeance on the victim. Surprisingly, this extraction is stratified. The warders and other prison bureaucrats, who are victims of poor reward system, extract their vengeance on the inmates. The inmates themselves construct a seemingly monarchical pecking order that makes the newcomer the target of extraction by those already inside or those with superior physical power. The prison re-creates a power space where might is a decisive arbiter in the contestation of rights. The entire stage is turned into “a single, large cell within the prison yard” (AT, 2) called Parity Cell. This suggests a unicentric order that the play is out to undermine.

The playwright recommends that the cell is best painted “white” or “grey”. The technical essence of these colours should not be over-looked. If painted “white”, it rhymes with the colour of prison inmates uniform in Nigeria.¹⁶ It symbolises ethical purity, which the inmates are expected to always aspire toward. It is the blemish on their moral being that should have brought them under normal circumstances, to the cell. However, if the director chooses grey, it accords with the dreary and gloomy nature of the inmates’ existence and the decadence of the prison’s infrastructure.

Be that as it may, neglect is the hallmark of parity cell as made evident from the beginning. This, perhaps, is borne out of the estimation of the prisoners by the state as social rejects. The stage direction eloquently supports this assertion:

The cell is overcrowded. Each man's 'post' is demarcated by a blanket folded to about 24 inches, or less. 'Soldiers' and 'officers' of the cell however have bigger posts. Some even have beds, but these are on their last legs, being wobbly and having no springs, and no mattresses, only blanket strips stung together somehow... Many of the IMATES are sitting huddled to their corners. Among these are those inflicted by "craw-craw" (Yaws, eczema, etc). The cell houses a bath place and a bucket latrine (in the cubicles already mentioned, marked INCONVENIENCES). If anyone wants to bathe or defecate, he does it in the full glare of everyone else. (AT, 15).

A sense of pluralism and diversity is created by the arrangement of the inmates on stage and through the use of lighting mechanism. They are arranged in groups to produce a sense of communal existence upon which the struggle for freedom and equitable distribution of social resources will be based.

Activities in the cell are diverse, ranging from playing games (draughts, ludo, etc., drawn on the floor, or cards that have been smuggled into the cell somehow), to talking, laughing, fighting short "cigarettes", marijuana or wrapped paper and bits (AT, 15).

This diversity is significant for three reasons:

First, the shift in the audience's attention through the use of stage lighting mechanism establishes the episodic nature of the play, making it a series of loosely strung scenes. What unites each episode is the abject condition of living in the prison. Phase II of the play provides sufficient evidence with its textual emphasis, showing the shifts and varieties.

Second, the scenic arrangement allows for a temporary halt of the theatrical narration in order to link the past reality (outside the prison) with the present (inside

the prison) through flash back. For instance, it enables the audience to understand the nature of Alege's trial by the magistrate, the reasons for his prosecution as well as the ideological foundation for his current radicalism through his encounter with the three Marxian Proselytizers (AT, 42-45). The flash back on Alege's trial demonstrates the magistrate's partiality and "unbridled prejudice against lowly, and unopportunityed folks" (AT, 38).

Third, the episodic mechanism aids the presentation of a panoramic view of the Nigerian polity, especially vistas of injustice to provoke sufficient revulsion in the audience so that they will be inspired to agitate for change.

The designation of the cell as "Parity Cell" is paradoxical. "Parity" denotes equality, or as in this case, uniformity of treatment. It suggests that the prisoners are all yoked in deprivation and collectively shared grievances. In the words of the Adjutant:

... we have a kind of solidarity here because we are all sufferers. This is why we call this place PARITY STATE. We are all the same - we all have similar tales to tell - of oppression, of dejection, of deprivation and so on. So, we tend to stick together in solidarity (AT, 29).

It is true that equality is a ground norm of a democratic government. It is also a necessary condition for addressing most of the prisoners' problem. However, in reality, parity is elusive. The designation, granted its idealistic impulse, articulates a yearning for freedom and equal opportunities.

In another sense, the label sharply contrasts with the hierarchical relationship constructed among the inmates and here in lies its paradox. In the parity state of *Awaiting Trouble*, there exists everything but parity. Parity is elusive and illusory. New comers who are regarded as “Alejos” (strangers) are treated as inferior beings. They are constant objects of lighthearted banter or severe ridicule. From them, those already in jail derive momentary psychic reliefs that sometimes border on masochism. The instance of inmates’ inhumanity to inmates flies in the face of fraternity and brotherhood connoted by parity.

In a related vein, the cell’s political formation is patterned after the structure of authority in the military institution. This institution is basically founded on hierarchical chain of command, concentration of power in a supreme and unquestionable centre and strict obedience by junior officers to their superiors’ command. Parity is an incongruous notion in such a socio-political formation.

Consequently, other inmates in the cell relate to General who occupies the apex of the echelon, with deference and sometimes obsequiousness. Similarly, the “soldiers” and “officers” are more privileged even in the crowded cells than other inmates. This social inequality is reminiscent of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* in *Animal Farm* under Napoleon’s dictatorship. The Pigs and Dogs enjoy greater access to the farm’s resources than other animals culminating in the axiom:

ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL
 BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE
 EQUAL THAN OTHERS (114).

From the above, it is decipherable that parity is a fictional ideation that captures the deceit and the contradiction in the state of the nation under military dictatorship. It registers the “lie” in the avowed commitment to fundamental human rights and transition to genuine democracy by the caricatured regime. The play demands an end to such a lie with its pursuit of true parity.

Awaiting Trouble does not dramatise a single event. Instead, there are multiple foci of representation. Within this plurality is the story of John Alege who stirs a group of benighted prisoners into revolting against an oppressive military order. Prefaced by a panoramic picture of the regime in operation, (in Montage I and II), Alege is arraigned before a magistrate for forceful abduction of one Miss Banke Alagbe from her parents home and keeping her for a period of eighty days before she was found. Though the affair could be attenuated as a union of two consenting adults, it is problematised by the class disparity among the parties involved. Banke’s father, a magistrate opposes the relationship and musters his professional influence to sever the inter-class union. Alege is consequently arrested, detained, tried and finally convicted of the offence. But the trial is not as important in itself as its exposition of perversion of justice under military dictatorship.

The personal injustice suffered by Alege is reified in the prison logic. This is because the inmates are depicted as victims of economic and social injustice too. Their economic rights are denied by the state because they lack access to employment, social security system, education, health care delivery system and good

accommodation. The economic system that produces the prisoners, as the playwright argues through Alege, benefits only minority elites.

The list of prisoners parades a bewildering array of inmates, including General who is sentenced to death for an offence which does not carry such a drastic penalty as at the time of its commission. Others include Soldier 1, a veteran of the Second World War (1939-1945) who suffers paralysis in the course of duty. In the absence of an institutionalised social security system, he is arrested for loitering. Soldier 2 is pushed to crime by unemployment while soldier 3 is a clergy who earns imprisonment as a result of indiscretion in relation with a female member of his congregation. The case of Soldier 4 is more grueling because the opportunity to realise the economic potentials is blurred by his low social background. He hails from “the deprived section” of the community. Some are detained for sundry offences ranging from light ones or what they call “sardine warrant” to violent crimes like murder, rape, drug peddling and treason. Some are detained without trial for a period longer than the statutory requirement – in violation of the principle of rule of law. Some are sentenced to an absurdly long jail term which is disproportional to the offence allegedly committed, like the man jailed for thirteen years for stealing a few tubers of yam (AT, 38). General pathetically sums up their plight:

GENERAL: And so, most of us come here because we do not have the opportunity to live, and be good. Many even come here for reasons that they themselves do not

know, or understand, for nothing other than that somebody wants them to be there. Our condition is worsened here.....
 We are hearded, pigs to the sty; sardine in a tin; slaves in a ship; cows, to the abattoir. The food we eat is nought but scum:
 (AT, 23).

While in prison, they hopelessly wait for trial, but what lies behind the horizon for their current waiting is cheerless. When they complete the term or are discharged and acquitted, they will have to contend with the harsh economic reality. This begets despondency, which they attempt to ventilate through self – mockery and re-enactment of circumstances leading to their incarceration.

There is a carefully arranged initiation ritual for new entrants – Alejos. This programme not only ensures their effective socialisation into the hierarchical power structure in the prison, but also conditions them for submission to the authority of the status quo represented in the prison’s administration. However, only the tough and sinewy, the notorious jail-bird (the *Ogbologbo*) like Alejo 2 can assert themselves and hasten their accommodation within the aperture of disempowerment that the prison metaphorically constructs. Whichever way justice turns its blind face, they are at a disadvantage as people who are “dregs of the society”, and hence, they are “awaiting trouble “not” trial. The need to turn the table of “trouble” against the tyrannical order informs Alege’s crusade for a radical social change.

The ingredients of revolution are notably in existence in the prison prior to the arrival of Alege. What is needed is a force to mobilise the inmates and channel their grievances to a positive course. The prison experience actually brings Alege into a

sharp confrontation with the verity of Marxist's claim on inequality and injustice in the society, which he declines to embrace as an undergraduate. Now that he is a victim, he recognises the truth in the submission of Marxist proselytizers that:

The price of indifference is death... when your neighbour is hungry and in chains, there is imminent danger to your own fed and free stomach. If you do not join hands in damming the stream of oppression, its torrent will one day sweep you off your feet, even in your own sweet little corner. (AT, 45).

He offers the inmate an alternative reading of their social reality, pointing to the inevitability of violent confrontation between them and their "oppressors" if their denied humanity is to be regained. He advocates jail - break which symbolically represents their ace to democratic freedom. The scheme involves seizing the warder on duty demobilising him, forcefully throwing open the prison gates for all prisoners to walk into freedom. Thereafter, they will join forces with a popular organisation committed to the same ideal of revolutionary struggle at the national level. The opportunity presents itself spontaneously, but cowardice and lack of conviction could not allow other inmates to lend a hand at the critical moment of collision with the warder. The play ends with Alege bitterly disappointed and betrayed.

In a bid to deconstruct the process of play production especially its occlusion of the physical presence of the playwright on the stage, a character named writer takes over the stage. He faults his own creation of another 'failed messiah' or betrayed social crusader in Alege and decides to mediate the overtly pessimistic tone of the

resolution with a more genial and positive ending. The writer here is an innovative intrusion of a presence that ordinarily remains absent on stage. Using the multi-media technique of epic, the writer brings back the plot of the play through remote control. The struggle between the state and the inmates, now led by another character, Comrade Jatto, is re-enacted. An inmate overpowers the warder in his attempt to settle personal scores. Others force the door open and file out into freedom before other warders could come to the rescue. Though when reinforcement comes from prison officers, Alege is shot in the forehead, he smashes the walkie-talkie, which is the nexus between the prison authority and the “Jackboot” outside. Symbolically, the action is a rebellious smashing to pieces of dictatorship.

J.P. Clark has earlier experimented with an idea of “Alternative close” in his four-movement play – *Song of A Goat*. But the intrusion of the writer is a unique aesthetic adventure that is congruent with the innovative spirit of *Awaiting Trouble* and the revolution that it is in pursuit of. Although it is presented as an alternative ending “for the optimist” (AT, 65), it still bears a mark of pessimism as Alege, the stimulus of the revolt is shot and killed. The optimistic twist can be deciphered only in the fact that the hitherto oppressed prisoners have escaped en masse into freedom, probably to liberate the whole nation. Besides, Alege in death slumps over the smashed pieces of the walkie-talkie, a metonymic representation of the oppressive state. This shows the triumph of Alege’s class and ideological stance over that of the oppressor’s camp, which is now in disarray as a result of the revolution.

Moreover, the open-ended nature of the play's conclusion leaves the audience's critical faculty to contend with the ultimate signification. But more importantly, the end illustrates the flexibility of a trado-epic text as a rehearsal guide. The producer is free to tinker with it in order to meet the exigencies of performance.

In terms of its overall structure, *Awaiting Trouble* is divided into six parts: The opening montage, Prelude I and II, the play proper in two phases (like the moon) and then the Alternative close. But these parts are not causally linked together in order to emphasise its episodocity in the manner of Brechtian epic or the skits of traditional masquerade performance in Yoruba society.¹⁷

The Opening Montage is a prefatory device establishing the narrative foundation of the play. 'Montage' means cutting, selection and arrangement of images to form a consecutive whole. As such, the montage emphasises the aberrations in as many facets of national life as possible to give a panoptic view of the undemocratic regime. The chorus and the preface of Old man's narration which indicate the target of the play buttress this point:

OLD MAN:

Itan mi dori o dori
O dori baba
Mo lo dori mama
Awon mejeeji
Igida Igida
Awon mejeji
Igida Igida

My story is about
A certain Baba
A certain mama
The two both of them
Igi da igi da ¹⁸
The two both of them
A matter for regret (AT, 4-5).

The montage here is an oblique evaluation of absolutism under General Babangida (1985-1993). He is parodied as King Pin and later Magistrate in Prelude II.

Even in the parodied form, the use of alienating elements like banner inscription makes the picture unflattering but credible:

...a military procession at the head of which a guard bears the banner: KEEP CLEAR, followed by a closely guarded box bearing the inscription: TREASURY, and surrounded by the king-Pins. Behind them another guard bears a caption with the inscription: LOOTING IN PROGRESS. The Igida song wells up in the wings, whereupon the last guard turns the other side of the caption he is holding, to show another inscription: DECREE 200: KEEP QUITE! The song stutters to a stop (AT, 5-6).

The era under scrutiny is shown as being antagonistic to transparency. There is looting in progress, yet, there is a decree, one out of scores, that forbids its revelation. The enactment of a soccer match with the King Pin as the referee reinforces the image of a corrupt, manipulative, deceitful and vicious regime. The era, as the expression in the old man's preface "Igida" implies, has become "a matter for regret".

Notably, the assemblage of props on the stage by the props man is a distancing technique showing the play's self-consciousness as a fiction. Besides, the old man's preface sets the narrative tone of the play, to show the play's indebtedness to the indigenous story - telling tradition. This is equally true of the audience participatory response: "Gbongidi gbon". It is a familiar chorus from Yoruba folk-tales. The urgency of the tone of this chorus and the pace of the enactment of the montage

however, dramatise the flurry of activities, the upheaval and turmoil that were prevalent in the polity when the play was premiered in 1993.

Prelude I and II further establish the play as a topical commentary on Nigerian politics. The arrest and hasty trial of Alege highlights injustice perpetrated by the regime. It prepares the audience for the collision that takes place later, between the oppressed (prisoners) and their oppressors (warders – agents of the state - and the state). From the preludes, it is shown that class disparity expressed in the inequality between the rich few and the poor masses is the root cause of the prevalent social anomy.

The play carries the argument further in its two phases. "Phases" here shows it as a record of certain stage of development in Nigeria's history. It captures the coping mechanism of prisoners in the face of deprivation, the gestation of revolution, conscientisation, mobilisation, the confrontation and its eventual failure. At the end of phase II, Alege emerges as a betrayed and frustrated social crusader. The Alternative close, however is to remedy the glaring cynicism. Thus, Oloruntoba-Oju, with the alternative ending attunes the play's discourse with the nuances of socialist realism.

The dysjunction between the autocratic reality and the theoretical ideals of democracy is at the base of the play's conflict. And if there is any aspect of the theatre where this is well articulated, it is in the creation of characters. The characters are significant not necessarily as individuals, but as social types with discernible class affiliation. Even though they are distorted, they still demonstrate the import of

collective action in negotiating the end of tyranny and in the institutionalisation of democracy. The characters are drawn on the Marxist principle that man's condition is mutable and that he is imbued with capacity to change his condition for good. The playwright creates characters who can be apt stimuli for social actions in their interaction with existential reality.

Alege, the revolutionary is at the centre of the play's conflict. But he is not the regular pro-classical hero like Kurunmi, Odewale or Ozidi. He motivates and mobilises the prisoners for the struggle, but he is cast aside after being betrayed. The revolution is ultimately achieved under the leadership of Comrade Jatto who has hitherto remained an inconsequential detainee.

From Prelude I and Prelude II the play introduces John Alege, a radical who is, imbued with a dialectical materialist attitude toward life. He professes, not "christianity" but "humanity" as his religion. In rousing the oppressed to challenge the conditions of their being, he is cast in the mould of such dramatic figures in African drama, like Kinjeketile in Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile*, kimathi in Ngugi wa Thiong'O's *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*; Harcourt Whyte in Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* and Akanbi in Osofisan's *Red is the Freedom Road*.

Alege belongs to that class of social critics or activists whom the then reigning order was won't to stigmatise as a "subversive element", an "extremist" or a "trouble maker". His class-consciousness informs his anger and rudeness to the magistrate. He

is outright contemptuous of authority, hence his declaration of the court's verdict as "senile pronouncements" (AT, 13).

However, in the course of enlisting other prisoners in the social struggle, he sometimes lapses into fallacy. Passion sometimes blurs his logic. This, one can say, is a failure of craft on the part of the playwright.

ALEGE: Let us not talk about offenses. Who steals and are brought here if not the have-nots and the deprived? The big, well to do and well-placed people who steal our wealth are hardly ever reprimanded! Who roams about street and are charged with wandering, if not the homeless? Who commits suicide but the desperate? It is the oppressors who have committed the offence, and it is from them we seek reparation.
(AT, 54).

In the above extract, three types of fallacies are noticeable. The first is the fallacy of "Tu quo que" (And you too"). This type justifies the oppressed's crime on the basis that the oppressor is also guilty. The second is that of "Argumentum ad hominen" which attacks the person while leaving the premise and substance of the argument. The result is a situation where "the big, well to do and well placed people" are found guilty by association. The substance of whether the prisoners commit punishable offences is no more central. Closely related to this is the third fallacy – "red herring". It also deviates from the main substance of the argument and directs attention away from his own misdemeanor. Ironically, Alege denounces the same tendency in General.

Only Alege out of other characters is identified by his proper name-John Alege. Some bear phoney military titles like General, Sergeant, Adjutant and Provost Marshal. Some adopt metier designations like Magistrate, Orderly, Court official, Pastor, Warder, Officer and Prosecutor. There are also types like Alejo and Accused. Some characters are simply identified by their nicknames-Sambros, Abel Takokoori, Ba Yawa or Comrade Jatto. Some are numerically labelled like 1 Inmate 2 Inmate, Proselytizer 1 and Proselytizer 2. Such fluid and hazy identities facilitate the dissolution of the individual for the sake of the collective. Consequently, because the emphasis of the play is not on the projection of individual destiny but collective interest, it becomes easy for players to swap roles or for a character to play two or three roles.

In another sense, Oloruntoba-Oju, through this weird collection, recreates oddities of socio-economic dis-equilibrium. Among the functionaries of an oligarchy erected among the inmates, there are men of other ranks and officers like General. They operate like a battalion of soldiers, complete with a regimental police and the Adjutant who is the officer responsible for general administration and discipline in the Parity State. The inmates also engage in parade like true military formations. This make-believe world is a mechanism through which they live with hardship. The degenerate condition of the prison make them "non-beings" or at best "sub-human". Of course, fantasised military titles metaphorically re-construct them in the image of contemporary rulers outside the prison walls. The titles afford the inmates a deception

of grandeur, which is a psychological therapy to mediate the prison's dreary condition. Beside, the titles register the fundamental inequality in the prison order and ostensibly in the larger society.

At the apex of the Parity State oligarchy is General with understrappers to attend to him. He is brave and strong but lacks the education and conviction of Alege. Though a victim of social injustice like many others, General is content with tolerating the status quo, hence, his passivity. To him, Alege is a mere troublemaker, a rabble-rouser who is doomed to fail. General is the typical cynic and consequently a major obstacle to the revolutionary cause. It is therefore, theatrically expedient that General and Alege are pitched against each other in a rhetorical/ideological contestation. The audience watches a debate between spokespersons of authoritarianism (General) and democratic freedom (Alege); between conservatism and social change; between individualism and collective struggle; between determinism and free will. While General is convinced of the futility of struggle and recommends individual's submission to his fate, Alege believes in man's ability to alter the condition of his existence for good, especially through violent confrontation with sources of the denial of his freedom. At that juncture, the stage turns into a podium of ideological warfare and inter-class tussle for power.

ALEGE: With the force of our numbers, and determination,
we can do a lot. ---We are the people, to whom
power rightly belongs.

INMATE: Me I no involve o.

GENERAL: Enough. I know the rest. As soon as
you started talking, I know where you were going to end.

Revolution hm? Change and all what not. But listen to what I have to say. Your way is a suicidal one. Where does it end? Many before you have made spirited beginnings.

But they hardly ever reach their quarry.... (AT, 53).

The above exchange is much likely to activate the audience's reasoning as they are sharply confronted with options for change. The stage formation is used to strengthen the dialectics.

(The cell is excited. Whispers, position clusters, etc. ALEGE and OFFICERS stand quite opposite each other, while the INMATES' cluster also define their positions) (AT, 53).

Other characters apart from Alege and General are undistinguished. But even in their seeming inconsequentiality, the playwright depicts the paradox of revolution that makes everyone important in the task of political change and yet, no one is indispensable. Consequently, an obscure inmate who overpowers the warder on-duty makes the last practical move that yields victory to the inmates. The revolution is finally achieved with Alege who kindles its consciousness in a state of immobility. He is reminiscent of the biblical Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt but could not get to the Promised Land. It is Jatto, who gets mentioned only too close to the denouement and who is too inconsequential to make a difference initially that leads the struggle to its "success". So, however thinly and indistinctly sketched, each of the inmates contributes to the realisation of the communal interest.

Essentially, the inmates are like abstract drawings but they still evoke images of Nigerian prisoners. These are persons who can be encountered in any Nigerian prison from Ikoyi to Alagbon, from Gashua to Kuje. For instance, Mase is an inmate who is already losing his sanity. He produces his own cigarette from wrapped papers (“mase” is a nickname derived from the Yoruba aphorism “ma see, ika ko sunwon” i.e. Refrain from it, wickedness is unprofitable). There is Sambros, the semi-illiterate who is fond of quixotic interpretation of words. There is also Ba Yawa an addict, who is enamoured of gambling his food for cigarette. (“Ba Yawa” in Hausa means it is not enough)¹⁹. The playwright captures deprivation in the prison through his antics. With RP, he stakes eba, cigarette and beans like the mendicants in Soyinka’s *Madmen and the Specialists*. The latter’s prizes are however more sinister as they gamble not with food but with human parts like eyes and limbs.

Beyond characterisation, Oloruntoba-Oju’s use of popular performance aesthetic elements like songs, music, dance and chants is worthy of attention. These are elements that if well employed are sure to win the heart of Nigerian audience either in the literary category or in the popular indigenous theatre. What predominates in the choice of these elements are songs of the streets, those that are popular and familiar to the audience so that they can join in singing in order to achieve the participatory *raison d’être* of *trado-epic* art. The songs are freely chosen from the serious and sombre to the purely comic; from the sublime to the vulgar. The profane and outright obscene do co-exist with the solemn and poetic.

To a large extent, the play's setting and its concomitant mood condition the songs. Some are elegiac while some are humorous, to ensure the stability of prisoners' emotion and sanity. Examples include songs like "Jon n gbongbo- Hit him hard"(20). "Eemo pelebe, eemo pelebe- Mystery, unfathomable, misfortune" (21), "Reburedi a o yo e o – Reverend, we must remove you" (22), "Bo se toro e fun wa- Even three pence, dash us" (24).

In the orientation programme for the Alejos, the latter's enactments are evaluated:

kawain
 kawa kawa
 kawain
 Alejo kawain
 Kawain
 Kawa bu barakata ya o
 Ya ya ya.²⁰

However, some songs are critical commentaries on the military establishment. An example is an apala song, sonorously rendered by General:

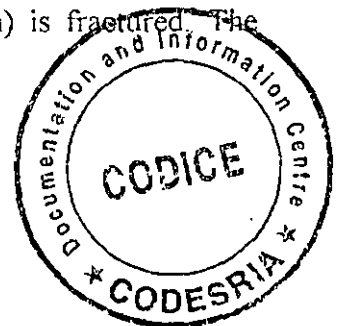
... Take a message to Christie
 But don't tell her about this new Decree
 That was passed after th'offence is done
 They have made this decree retroactive
 And this is why I'm to die....
 Our leaders are deaf as they are dumb
 As unmoved as they are unwise (AT, 17)

Similar popular motif runs through the diction of *Awaiting Trouble*. The need to be as accessible to a wide variety of audience serves as the impetus for its poetics. Thus, language in the play is a pot pourri of street clichés; Lorry Park hackneyed expressions, hawkers' ditties, touts' mannerism and slangs. Added to these are

familiar proverbs, epigrams, Marxist slogans, and Biblical quotes (correctly employed or deliberately distorted).

Being a play that is primarily out to re-write and subvert the existing dictatorial order, its diction conveys eloquent use of this subversion. Though written in English, there is a prevalent fracturing of the semantic and syntactical codes of English in a manner that suggests the violation of humanity suffered by the Inmates and also being experienced in the larger society. Through deliberate inversion of English grammatical codes, the audience is essentially shocked into a new awareness, of the deprivation of the status quo and new possibilities, through departure from the "norms" of the present order and its "perfect" rhetorics. The status quo to the playwright has lost its justification for existence, hence, it has to be probed, bared and demystified in its stark imperfection.

The linguistic aberration is registered in several ways. One of these is through the use of pidgin English. Its usage in the play achieves simplicity and accessibility. It is a commonly used medium of communication in prisons, military barracks and markets in urban areas in Nigeria. Pidgin registers the social background of characters, who are mostly drawn from the lower cadre of the social ladder. They are semi-literate like Sambros. But essentially, the pidgin here is marked by code mixing, especially the mixture of English with substrate language of the speaker. Notably, the phonological, semantic, lexical and syntactical rule of the superstrate (English) is fractured. The



result is a daring experimentation in diction or the attainment of new possibilities in signification. For example:

SOLDIER: All correct sah. Water ready for your baf sah.

(AT, 32).

The soldier here is probably a batman with little competence in English language. What he wishes to tell his master, obsequiously with his sah is that—

“All is correct sir. Water is ready for your bath sir”.

The incompetence or deprivation of the speaker is marked by elision of “is” in the two sentences.

The deviation or subversion is also registered in malapropism and solecism as exemplified in the following:

SAMBROS: -This Mase now, na
assot occasiona arm in be im offence
 (emphasis added) (AT, 2).

“assot occasiona arm” is a malapropismic rendering of a misdemeanor which in legal term is called “assault occasioning harm”. Apart from the humour it is likely to generate, the deficiency points to the deprived background of the speaker.

The deviation may come in form of neologism, producing in effect bold linguistic possibilities like “voidate” in the following:

ALEGE: (to SAMBROS) I would like to *ease* myself.
 SAMBROS: I don tell you say nothing dey *easy* for here.
 ALEGE: I mean, suppose one wants to *voidate*
 SAMBROS: You no go fit *avoid* anything for here (AT, 37).

Another feature of the revolutionary schema in the diction is through deliberate subversion of popular saying and “blasphemous” rendering of Biblical axiom especially to buttress the materialist disposition of the play, and sometimes to underscore the cynicism of the speaker.

SOLDIER 4: ---Wretched are the poor, for suffering²¹
Is their lot on earth'. (AT, 23).

GENERAL: We return here to wait. Wait, like christians,
for the day of doom, or deliverance, knowing
neither the hour nor the day when that doom
or deliverance will come²² (AT, 24)

Or

GENERAL: ... The heavens and earth may pass away, but
this prison will never be empty.²³
There will never be a dearth of skulls in the house
of death. (AT, 25)

In the revolutionary spirit of the play, no knowledge or idea is too sacrosanct to be challenged. No received tradition is too numinous to be queried or even inverted, as the various linguistic and epistemological deviations point out, hence, its accommodation of what otherwise would be considered vulgar or obscene as this:

ALEGE: Make way for the rod of tyranny. Let us
lie on our backs, spread our thighs apart, and
give free passage to the thrust of dictatorship.
let it bore into us, however it will. (AT, 55).

Because the prisoners live in intolerably harsh condition, they adopt linguistic veil through euphemism to temper the harshness. They generate their own parlance just as in military barracks or educational institutions. In this euphemistic register, the prison cell becomes “Parity Cell”. Slap or severe beating is called “Naira”. “GEM” is

collective. While Osofisan in *Yungba Yungba* draws his dramatis personae exclusively from women folk, Olorunfoba-Oju in *Awaiting Trouble* parades prison inmates who are exclusively male. However, in both plays, the gender factor is peripheral. What obtains is intra-gender oppression as Iyeneri's personalisation of collective power shows. It is in the same way that king Pin, Magistrate, Warder, Officers and General – all male- deny other men who are in majority, their rights and freedom. In both plays, the contention, is that male and female have-nots are victims of an undemocratic economic and political system, and they can only attain true liberation if the entire society, is free from dictatorship.

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NOTES

1. This type of drama has been variously described by scholars as “radical”, “emergent”, “revolutionary” and “Marxist” among others. But none of these labels captures the confluence of the indigenous and the foreign in the aesthetics of the plays.
2. Femi Osofisan. *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1993. Subsequently, references to this play are given by citing the pagination in the text after the abbreviation YYDC.
3. Perhaps, the thrust of Osofisan’s ideological sympathy accounts for the dedication of the play to Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, former President of Tanzania and the proponent of African socialism in “Ujamaa”.
4. The series of intrigues and regicides that attended the battle for the English crown between the Yorkists and Lancastrians around this period were documented in Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* and provided subjects for William Shakespeare’s historical tragedies like *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *King Henry IV Part I and II* and *King Henry VI*.
5. The story is taken from Odu Osagunleja in Ifa divination corpus. According to the odu, the two hands were locked in a battle for supremacy with the mouth. They refused to bring food to the mouth and suddenly all parts of the human body including the hands, legs, stomach and head began to wither due to starvation. These entities consulted Ifa oracle and were asked to offer sacrifice to Esu and acknowledge the superiority of the mouth. They did as admonished and normalcy returned. The withered parts regained their vitality. The odu goes thus:
 Ada saka l’awo inanaran moro
 Awoko o pin sa awo ode Ijesa
 Oran yii o l’aro tele
 Ki won o to di fa ilee... won
 A difa fun bure mokan lelogun
 Won ni awon ko l’ olori

Enu ji enu ko jije
 Ogun isuko, ogbon Ewura
 Aadota egbodo elubo
 Oun l'afi kawo d'ele wa
 Ohun tee ba ri e fenu je
 Enu ma l'agba.

(Ada saka was the diviner of inanaran moro
 Awoko o pin sa, the diviner of Ijesa land.
 This matter was not properly thought out
 Before their household consulted the Ifa oracle.
 It divined for twenty-one ribs
 Who were battling for supremacy and headed for
 Olodumare (Almighty's) court.
 They claimed that they lacked a leader.
 The mouth woke up and declined food
 Twenty tubers of white yam, thirty tubers of wateryam
 Fifty lumps of dried parboiled yam for yam flour
 were what we used to restore glistening skins to members of our household.
 Whatever you have, feed the mouth.
 The mouth is supreme.

I am grateful to Chief Yemi Elebuibon, an Ifa priest who supplied this information in Osogbo on 15th July, 2000.

6. At independence, there were three regions – East, North and West. Three parties - National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) and Action Group (AG), controlled their governments. Igbo, Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba ethnic groups predominantly populated the regions respectively.

7. Instances of free economic and social relations in the market between these beings can be found in the novels of Daniel O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola. See for instance, Fagunwa's *Ogboju ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, and *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje*. Also, consider Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*.

8. Some of these leaders include Idi Amin of Uganda, Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, Jean-Bedel Bokasa of Central African Republic, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, Siad Barre of Somalia, Mobutu Sese Seko of Congo Kinshasha, Macias Nguema of

Equatorial Guinea, Samuel Doe of Liberia, Yakubu Gowon, Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha of Nigeria. (See Soyinka, 1999).

9. Invective as a verbal art has been used to develop theme, conflict and characterisation in drama. Examples include the quarrel between Sikira and Liza in Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*; between Amusa and market women in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*; between Okoro and Koko his wife in Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*. It also features in Osofisan's *Morountodun* and *Who's Afraid of Solarin?*

10. The play was premiered at the Africa Hall of University of Ilorin on 23rd October, 1993.

11. Instead of a democratically elected government, a selected Interim National Government (ING) led by Chief Ernest Sonekan succeeded the regime on August 26, 1993.

12. Oloruntoba-Oju, *Awaiting Trouble* Ilorin: Academia pub, 1993. Subsequent references are acknowledged in the text after the abbreviation AT.

13. Generational categorisation here is not in terms of age of the writers, but in terms of aesthetic tendencies and also the period of their intervention in Nigerian Theatre history.

14. The assertion is supported by such detention experience recorded in Soyinka's *The Man Died*, Bola Ige's *Detainee's Diary* and Ken-Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*.

15. Nigerian Prisons still parade obsolete structures and facilities inherited from the colonialists; hence, the institutions are bedeviled with congestion, poor welfare scheme, and lack of proper rehabilitative programmes like education and skill acquisition. According to Mohammed Jarma, the Comptroller-General of Nigerian Prisons, There are 146 prisons in the country as at September 2000, with capacity for 35,921 inmates. However, 47,000 inmates were inhabiting them. 63% of these were suspects awaiting trial. Because of inadequate provision for them by the authorities,

the inmates resort to ingenious tactics for survival like violence, extortion, begging and gambling (as Ba Yawa does in *Awaiting Trouble*). The system is dehumanising rather than reforming. Felix Obi clearly paints the picture of what obtains in the prisons in a report titled "Contractors, the Bane of Prisoners": *The level of victimization varies from prison to prison and it is more common among the awaiting trials. It is very pronounced in Kirikiri Maximum and Medium Security. There, it is the survival of the fittest. They give themselves some sorts of law that there is no way you can help but offend them, like you must not talk at a given time... you must sit down at a given time... like if the boss of the cell is moving about, nobody moves. Every body must greet him "good morning sir!".... You don't go near the general water pail. There are some laws that govern the use of the lavatories – stringent laws. And if you offend them, the punishment varies. Like general beating, seizure of ration, frog jump, crawling etc.* See *The Comet*. Lagos: Sunday September 18, 2000, p.33. See also, the annual Reports of Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), Amnesty International and Committee for the Defence Of Human Rights (CDHR), for 1998, 1999 and 2000.

16. As at the time when the play was first performed, the official uniform for prisoners was white.

17. For more information on the traditional masquerade performance, see Joel A. Adedeji "Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre" in Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele (eds.) *Theatre in Africa*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978, pp.27-51.

18. "Baba" "Mama" and Igida" are veiled punny reference to Babangida, former military Head of State whose regime is the primary target of the play, and his spouse, Maryam. The couple's personalised rule was close in nature to monarchy. The deceit, political intrigues, manipulation and economic mismanagement that characterised the era, exposed in *Awaiting Trouble* have been subjects of discourse by several commentators. See Oyeleye Oyediran (ed.) *Governance and Development in Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Professor Billy J. Dudley*. Ibadan: Oyediran Consult Int., 1996.

See also, Larry Diamond. "Introduction: Roots of Failure, seeds of Hope" in Larry Diamond et. al. (eds.) *Democracy in Developing Countries: Africa* Vol.2. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Runner pub, 1998, pp. 1-32.

19. There is an effort to reflect the multi-ethnic nature of Nigerian society in the character composition in the prison, hence, the Hausa background of this character.

20. This song was popular in the early 1990s. It is taken from an LP record of Orlando Owoh titled "Experience". The record captures the harsh experience of the artiste in Alagbon prison, Lagos where he was detained around 1988. He was accused of drug trafficking. For details, listen to Chief Orlando Owoh and his African Kenneries, OLPRS 003, 1988.

21. This is from "The Beatitudes" in St. Matthew 5:3. The correct version is "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven".

22. Cf. St. Matthew- " Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the son of man cometh." (Matthew 25: 143)

23. Cf. St. Matthew- " Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass, till all these thing be fulfilled. Heavens and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass.

CHAPTER FIVE

GYNOCENTRIC TRANS-POSITION OF POWER IN *THE REIGN OF WAZOBIA AND THE WIVES' REVOLT*

One of the challenges of democratisation in Nigeria is the nature of women participation. The democratic pursuit from the colonial to the post-independence era has not recorded a significant measure of participation from women when compared with men. Considering the paramount nature of citizens' consent and participation in democracy, inequality in this regard is a function of gender disparity. The disparity is however, not peculiar to Nigeria, neither is it a recent phenomenon. The gynocentric construct the discourse of democratisation seeks to replace what is considered a male-centred or patrifocal social formation and power relation. This artistic option is used to create awareness about the limitations of gender imbalance, as it is inimical to political interests of both sexes.

Every society erects its own political framework through which social institutions share resources and opportunities between the two sexes. This sharing, scholars have argued, is characterised by inequality with the balance of privilege tilted in favour of the male. Thus, according to Mosse, "no where do women exercise power and influence in the public domain in the same way that men do.... Because women are poorly represented in the public sphere, they are less able to exercise power and influence for the well-being of their gender" (83-84). These opinions are also

canvassed in hook (1984); Chukwuma (1990); Imam (1996); de Beauvoir (1997); Kolawole (1998) and Badejo (1998). Helen Cixous contends that the question of sexual difference is accompanied with the opposition between 'activity' and 'passivity' with women being identified with the latter.

In the specific case of Nigeria, it has been frequently stated that women participation at almost every level of governance is disproportionate to that of men. Mabel Tobrise in *Nigerian Feminist Theatre* laments the absence or lack of access of women to the core of Nigerian politics (29-30). How democratic is a political system that does not ensure adequate representation of a segment that is almost half of the population (women)? How can this be addressed? What are the necessary devices or values that can mediate women's acknowledged inadequate participation in the democratic process? In spite of the constitutional provision for equal rights and freedom for both sexes and prohibition of discrimination along sex, race, ethnic and religious lines, how far is this the case in reality? ¹ These important issues have been receiving theatrical expression in contemporary Nigeria.

Feminist epistemology ² has consistently shown that gender imbalance occurs in almost every aspect of life, theatre not excluded. The literary space in Nigeria for instance has been described by Chikwenye Ogunyemi as a "patriarchal wilderness", dominated by "male writers and male critics who deal almost exclusively with male characters and male concerns, naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience" (61). Endorsing this submission, Oloruntoba-Oju (1998) stresses that in the semiotic

representation of gender relationship in African drama, “the dominant sign is the lionised male who virtually appropriate the entire landscape by his pervasive presence and influence”. At the other side of the image is the woman “who is often consigned to a stereotype existence as mother, daughter, sister, rural woman or city pariah” (117). He concludes that there is an entrenchment of “phallus semiosis” in literary texts, which implies that the position of maleness or masculinity represents “ability, courage, firmness, leadership or socio-economic and political superiority, wisdom, honour, integrity and so on” (122-23).

The essence of gynocentric aesthetics is to generate awareness and sharpen the audience’s political consciousness with a view to redressing the limitation. Indeed, it contends with what Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory* calls “the cultural ‘mind-set’ in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality” (122). This theatrical form inverts or balances power structure in favour of womenfolk. Women are represented as having or deserving equal rights with men especially in accessing decision-making organs of the society. The aesthetics supports the larger political pursuit through which women are (re) claiming equal access to the public sphere with men. The plays portray women who are individually or collectively liberated from the unpleasant experience of male domination.

Although the strategies of engagement differ in consonance with the ideological, experiential and artistic inclination of the dramatists, there is a convergence of purpose in the advocacy of the expansion of the public space to

accommodate greater participation of women in the conduct of public affairs. The plays challenge the values of patriarchy by creating a counter-power structure as obtained in *The Reign of Wazobia* or by affirming gender complementarities as valid route to democracy as *The Wives' Revolt* illustrates. The notion of womanity in such plays contrasts with the subjugated position, absence and other stereotypes with which women are associated in the "androcentric" canons of Nigerian drama. The theatre affords a fictive re-definition of power relations as women leave the margin to occupy the centre stage of power.

The adoption of a literary form like drama, which is hitherto dominated by male writers, is in itself indicative of re-visioning by women dramatists like Onwueme (with her numerous plays), Oyedepo (*The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested*) and Okafor (*The Lion And the Iroko*) among others. While noting that extant drama promote women's supposed weakness and inferiority, female writers think differently by creating a new aesthetics that is favourably disposed to the projection of women's concern. In such works, the woman is the centre of focus as the protagonist or heroine who motivates actions and dictates the pace of dramatic conflicts.

Not all critics however, endorse the feminist assumption about the inferiority of women in Africa. Some critics have dismissed the above notion as indices of western feminism, for it is such assumption that informs the antagonism, aggression and violence of "radical feminism". In its place, Catherine Acholonu for instance advocates "motherism" whose attributes and weapons are "love, tolerance, service and

mutual co-operation of the sexes" (111). Taking cognisance of African (Nigerian) culture and tradition, she argues that sexual stratification or gender inequality was not part of the African women's existence prior to colonial intervention and that the gender factor was a demobilisational and marginalising strategy of the Western colonialists and Arabian imperialists. She rejects patriarchy or male dominance as an explanatory term for gender relation in traditional Africa, being coloured as it were with Western bias (18).

Though the primary concern here is not the contending feminist postulations, it seems that Acholonu's submission is problematised by generalisation of equality of the sexes, the opposite of which she accuses Western and African feminists. The reality of gender imbalance in African polity is quite weightier than what can be easily shoved aside as "scattered instances of male dominance" (28) whether in traditional or in the modern period. As the studied texts demonstrate, sexual inequality is manifest in Africa's traditional and current political formation. Recognition of this reality rather than its denial is more beneficial to the practical struggle for democracy and its distillation into dramatic discourse. Meanwhile, it is against the backdrop of gynocentricity and de-centering of patriarchy in governance that the techniques of signification in Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* and Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* are subsequently analysed.

The Reign of Wazobia

Tess Osonye Akaeke Onwueme is easily one of the most prolific Nigerian female playwrights who emerged in the eighties. She has written well over twenty plays, some of which have won literary awards³: *A Hen too Soon* (1983), *The Broken Calabash* (1984), *The Desert Encroaches* (1985), *A Scent of Onions* (1986), *Ban Empty Barn* (1986), *Mirror for Campus* (1987), *Legacies* (1989), *Parable for a Season* (1991), *Riot In Heaven* (1996), *The Missing Face* (1997) and *Shakara the Dance Hall Queen* (2000).

These plays are mostly centred on the “woman-being”. Onwueme’s dramaturgy is consistently concerned with the problems, frustrations, hopes and triumphs of womenfolk especially in their struggle against subjugating forces. She affirms the equality of women with men, believing that whether at domestic or public sphere, men and women ought to be engaged in a union of equals. But because there is a gap between this ideal and reality, Onwueme reinforces the bond of comradeship among women. Women solidarity to her is a positive source of strength and a desideratum in democratic empowerment. She asserts that the mission of her writing is not simply to entertain but to raise the consciousness of the less privileged group, especially the African woman. As she remarks in an interview:

In my work, I keep probing into the fatty tissue of gender race and class tucked under the bloody arms of nationhood and globalization. My mission is to strip the fat, so the malnourished

truths,...dressed in the garb of freedom, justice and equality for all – may show the lean, naked dimensions of privilege imposed on the poor majority who are constantly being pushed to the shorter end of socio-economic power and authority.... This is why I have taken sides with the less privileged women and the poor people of African descent...⁴

As a female dramatist, she sees the role of her aesthetics as that of “re-writing the truths and insights of the male writers” of the previous generation regarding African women. She writes about the experience of the African woman from within and considers herself at a gender advantage above male writers who at best can only portray her empathically.

Part of Onwueme’s theatrical re-visionism in *The Reign of Wazobia* is the re-invention and negation of traditional rites that nurture gender disparity. The play depicts a group of women who join forces to gain political advantage over men, exploring the latter’s putative greed and obsession with power. Consequently, the women succeeded in reversing the culturally erected disequilibrium in power relation within the society. She contends that for democracy to take root and be sustained, the woman’s ‘otherness’ must be properly addressed. It somehow departs from the mode of constructing gender identities on the one hand and the familiar engagement with love and matrimony often found in the plays of an older female dramatist, Zulu Sofola (e.g. *Wedlock of the gods*, *The Wizard of Law* and *Sweet Trap*).

In exploring the phenomenal battle of the sexes, *The Reign of Wazobia* depicts an open protestation against socio-cultural and political motivations for sexual inequality especially in the public sphere. It proceeds from the advocacy of gender

equality, denunciation of female subordination and ends up in the liberation of women's hitherto denied will to power.

At the centre of conflict is Wazobia, the female regent of Ilaa in Anioma kingdom. Her provisional tenure of three seasons has expired, but she is reluctant to yield power to a substantive male king as demanded by tradition of the kingdom. She is consequently locked in a fierce battle for the throne with male chiefs who are poised to end her allegedly despotic and "terroristic" interregnum. On her part, Wazobia seeks to perpetuate herself in power as a way of rejecting women's exclusion and men's perpetual domination. To her, the custom that prescribes the role of regency for women and limits them to that is discriminatory. It basically ensures that only a man will always become the substantive king and the female regent would have to leave office at the end of three seasons when the new "male" king would have been installed. She captures the exploitation in a metaphor of fruit which men for ages have "used, sucked dry and disposed off at will"⁵.

The passivity, which makes women, not actors on political stage but social beings always acted upon is what Wazobia is set to stop and she is stirring other women's consciousness in this direction. The tone of this motif is set in the play's prologue which features a mock battle between the mob of men fiercely demanding the Wazobia's immediate abdication and an enraged army of "naked" women screening her from men's aggression. The play's conflict is further illuminated in Movement One, through Wazobia's dilemma. Should she cede the crown to a male king as

traditionally expected of her or hold on to it? If she quits, she will be honouring tradition and the “unjust” status quo. If she insists on staying on despite the expiration of her tenure, she will be presenting the women of Ilaa with a *fait accompli* in the task of defying a perceived patriarchal order propped up by tradition and “divine will”. However, Wazobia’s puzzle in the matter somehow aligns her with a dictator who hides under altruistic gender motives and rhetoric to seek power for personal ends. It seems she is suffering from the same ailment she sets out to cure – self-perpetuating authoritarianism:

They want Wazobia ousted
 Wazobia too resists and will persist
 I, Wazobia will show them
 What the left hand did to the anus
 I am the earth itself
 Where will you move it to?
 I Wazobia have tasted power and WILL NOT GO
 (Playwright’s emphasis, TROW, 6)

What follows expectedly, is a battle of the sexes for the vacant throne between the forces of tradition led by Iyase, Idehen and other chiefs on the one side and the forces of female ascendancy represented by Wazobia, Omu and the women folk on the other.

The confrontation is prefaced by a flashback that re-enacts the process of choosing and installing Wazobia among other maidens as the regent. The flashback shows her transformation from “a mere girl” into an authoritative and assertive “king”. It also foregrounds the clash between her and Iyase who declines to pay homage in an ostensible demonstration of non-recognition of her authority. The female regent by

implication does not command equal respect that would be given a male king by the men folk. But Wazobia reverses this trend by extracting submission from the men through Iyase. She vehemently asks Iyase to kneel and the latter willy-nilly complies. Iyase's humiliation and final submission therefore, pre-figures the erosion of the authority of patriarchy.

Onwueme's polemical thrust in *The Reign of Wazobia* ties women's emancipation to group solidarity and co-operation. She ascribes the fact of their otherness to various factors like jealousy, docility, inferiority complex, hatred and uncritical attitude to received tradition. This is exemplified through the alliance between Anehe and Wa against Wazobia on the one hand and Zo, Bia and other supporters of Wazobia on the other. It is also echoed in the domestic quarrel between a husband and his wife, which later becomes a matter for public arbitration. The resolution of the conflict in favour of the woman sharpens gender differences and accentuates the struggle for power. Men perceive in Wazobia's verdict on the quarrel, a direct threat to their authority not only at home, but also in the affairs of Anioma. Since her continuous retention of the crown imperils male hegemony, the men resolve to "uproot her like a decayed tooth" from the throne. As both sexes set to resist mutually suspected "misrule", the stage is set for the chaos that predominates in the dénouement.

Although the imperative of Wazobia's dethronement forges a momentary alliance between Iyase and Idehen (two aspirants to the throne), the alliance is overtly

built upon mutual treachery and deception. It is easy for women to counteract and render the seeming solidarity ineffective by the women. So, men's attempt to publicly present her with the traditional calabash and pot of herbs to seal her dethronement ends in fiasco:

(...Led by the Omu, they [women] advance, naked and in unison, form an arc behind WAZOBIA. The men are so shocked that they retreat, stagger and freeze in their stupefaction. Total silence...) (TROW, 61).

As the men flee in disarray, the play ends in an apparent gynocentric order. The reign of women under Wazobia has just begun and it is difficult if not impossible to terminate it judging from the futile efforts of men. However, herein lies the problematic of Onwueme's creation. The manner of resolving the conflict at the end tends to validate a genderised power structure in spite of the overt opposition toward it. What the playwright sets out to achieve is the enlargement of the democratic arena to allow equal participation of the sexes in public affairs. But the play ends in the affirmation of authoritarianism, which it is designed to combat, albeit in its present form, the authoritarian structure is being presided over by women, not men. This is what Kristeva would describe as "inverted sexism"(471). It should be remarked that any social change that is anchored on a non-democratic hierarchical system would only aggravate inequality, rather than meliorating it.

Observable in the polemics of the play is the paradox of gender discourse, which seeks to redress marginality through centering, invisibility through visibility

and exclusion through inclusion. Judith Lober articulates this paradox when she argues that “in order to dismantle the institution, you must first make it very visible” (10). The programme of “visibility” is pursued in *The Reign of Wazobia* right from the prologue and projected not only into characterization but also into the mis-en-scene. As the stage direction indicates, a pool of light picks out the centre of Anioma kingdom:

(... At this centre, is an empty THRONE with an effigy of the king [OBI-OGISO] sitting side by side and WAZOBIA regaled in an outfit similar to that of the late king...) (TROW, 1)

Onwueme employs traditional political structure in her goal of inspiring women toward change. Though the structure is not democratic, the process of social change enacted here manifests certain democratic ethos, which are instructive to the audience. Among these are tolerance, co-operation, equality and respect for fundamental rights, especially the rights of women to participate in public affairs. The effigy of late Ogiso – an iconic representation of the old regime – as well as the empty throne that symbolises power-in-transition, instantly captures the audience’s attention. It is a seemingly clean slate on which Wazobia is to inscribe a new distinctive notion of power outside subsisting patriarchy. That she stands equidistant from the throne registers her position of “otherness” in relation to the masculine order. This reality unconsciously evokes a sense of discrimination, which Wazobia evidently opposes.

Wazobia is not regaled as a woman, but in attire “similar to that of the late king”. The stage instruction is quite revealing in this cultural practice:

(...Wazobia inherits all the royal regalia of the late king and from now on she can only appear in public in these royal outfits. On no occasion should she be dressed any longer as a woman) (*TROW*, 18).

Here, the gender predisposition of the throne is much evident. To occupy it, the female regent has to deny and suppress her female self. The dressing is regarded as one of the codes of compliance erected by the society in the course of history to foster male authority. It emphasises the woman's otherness within relations of power. What defines Wazobia's essence therefore, is the need to transcend the registered otherness and transpose her into 'subject' as the action unfolds; a possibility carefully foregrounded in the visible empty throne.

Wazobia's character is quite germane and deserves closer attention. She is the pillar of Onwueme's gynocentric schema. The playwright depicts her as a woman whose single act of defiance triggers off a significant development in the polity. With her fortuitous choice as regent, she gradually transforms into a grown up, authoritative king and no more a maiden. She asserts herself by filling and dominating the throne. She frontally challenges male chiefs who would not accord her the same respect they would bestow on a male king. The experience of Idehen while stealthily donning her crown shows the awe and fear that she now inspires:

(...IDEHEN stultified, embarrassed and nearly choking from shock of being apprehended, falls belly-down in absolute prostration to the one who has just emerged. It is WAZOBIA. IDEHEN fretting, greets. With each greeting, he stands, prostrates, hitting his forehead on the ground in absolute submission) (*TROW*, 43).

At one level of meaning, Wazobia is representative of every woman experiencing marginalisation or outright exclusion from the public sphere. The essence of her portrait therefore, transcends textual boundaries. She is at another level, shorn of familiar stereotypical trappings of the woman. As such, she is a re-visioning of the female iconography that expresses her in some contexts as inferior and inessential. Wazobia is created by the author in a manner that distances her from every woman in that sense.

Wazobia as the eponymous hero of the play re-visits the concept of heroism especially in the extant canons of Nigerian literary drama. The genre is replete with heroes and male characters who actively impinge on, if not overtly bestride the universe of their respective plays. For example, Odewale in *The Gods are not to Blame*, Kurunmi in *Kurunmi*, Kongi in *Kongi's Harvest*, Elesin Oba in *Death and the king's Horse man* and Ozidi in *Ozidi*. Where women find space at the centre of conflict as illustrated in Duro Ladipo's *Moremi* or Osofisan's *Morountodun*, the women are usually attached through economic condition and social standing to certain men either as wives or daughters. This is however, not the case with *The Reign Of Wazobia*. Wazobia derives her essentiality not at the domestic front as a daughter, wife or mother, but in the turbulent arena of politics. She is not married, and consequently not tied to a man. Even her parents, according to tradition, have to leave the kingdom for exile.

As a woman of immense accomplishment who directs the political course of her society, Wazobia reminds us of Aristotelian heroes, even though her triumph in the power struggle is owed to group solidarity and co-operation among women. Her low background however, serves as a reinforcement of her sublimity. As we learn from Wa, she is “a mere girl raised from the dust” (TROW, 14). Zo also implies that she is raised “from the dregs of poverty” (TROW, 15). Her mother, in the words of Anehe is a “nonentity”. Her father too, according to Iyase “could not beat his chest before men who were men”, hence, he dismisses him as a mere “chaff of grain” (TROW, 40). In spite of her low background, she towers above other beings in the kingdom right from the beginning of her regency. Amidst the smiling and kneeling crowd of women and men, “only WAZOBIA remains standing, smiling, looking triumphant among the kneeling crowd” (TROW, 13). This stage formation indeed, reinforces her supremacy, and the same purpose is achieved at the end, when the women “mount” Wazobia shoulder-high and scream: “Long Reign WA-ZO-BIA” (TROW, 62). Now in the palace, she has a wider stretch of influence to operate from, at least, wider than what would have accrued to her as a housewife or ordinary woman.

Wazobia is revered and idealised as she plays a pivotal role in social re-ordering. She makes a great deal of difference in the lives of the community especially women folk. The royal bard’s eulogistic chants amplifies her super-eminence:

DRUMMER: the masquerade who stands nose down while
others sniff head high in the sky,

Wazobia whose hands mend the tattered
sinews of our world... (TROW, 5).

Later, the drummer adds:

Here comes the lion
When the lion enters the arena,
Lesser animals search for their holes in earnest! ...
I salute you, house o dry stick which remains
Standing when everyone expects it to fall. (TROW, 18-19).

Onwueme draws from the Anioma tradition of praise-songs and heroic chants called *Itu Afa*. The chants serve political ends because through them, the public estimation of noble men are enhanced as the chanter pours encomium on them.

Wazobia stands against series of cultural practices that inherently undermines the woman's humanity in her pursuit of a holistic undermining of masculine hegemony. Such cultural practices include funeral rites that widows especially royal ones, are to undergo. She stops the treatment meted out to widows particularly those that inhibit their civil liberty. She contends that widows need not be subjected to the torment of incessant funeral rites that men are not subjected to when they lose their wives. Thus, she restores some dignity and freedom to the king's widows. Her apparent apologia notwithstanding, Bia attests the reforms of Wazobia when she reminds Anehe:

But for Wazobia, you 'll not be standing firm on the ground.
You would have remained, tucked away, rejected today like pudding
without wrap" (TROW, 18).

A widow in Anioma is supposed to undergo strenuous funeral rites and survive the ordeal in order to prove her innocence and exonerate her from the charge of complicity in her husband's death. A woman who dies mourning according to Omu is adjudged unclean and must be left to rot in the evil forest. Because men are not asked to undergo similar ordeal whenever they lose their spouses, Wazobia attacks the palpable inequality in the traditional practice.

Wazobia rejects the exclusion of women and youths from discussion on matters of state concern, which according to Idehen "are too heavy for the brittle heads of women and children" (TROW, 27). She also condemns the practice of cringing and kneeling by women, vying for the king's attention through delicious food. To her, apart from the fact that kneeling symbolically reduces women's height and essence, modern realities challenge women to stand up bravely to confront the myriad of practices curtailing their freedom. Perhaps, that is why she refuses to pay homage to the masquerade. The masquerade represents a cultural force of keeping women down from emancipation, as symbolised in its "backward dance-steps". Anehe succinctly portrays Wazobia's revisionism when she informs Iyase that:

Since Wazobia ascended the throne, most traditions have been turned upside down. Wives no longer take turns to cook and compete for their husband's tongue and stomach. Wazobia insists that we all cook and share together. Reducing all to the same level (TROW, 48).

Such equality expresses democratic intent though subsumed under an authoritarian mien.

Another of such practices is wife beating or wife battering. To the man who beats his wife, he has acted within the confines of tradition. "As our fathers did, so must we". (34). The wife to him is a property that he pays to own from his "hard-earned money". Onwueme, through this reasoning points out the absurdity in such an undynamic conception of tradition. The gender polarisation that greets Wazobia's verdict against the man is sharp. As the man stages a walkout in protest, other men especially the chiefs follow him. But the women on other hand ululate to celebrate their freedom.

Because they cannot control her, men scheme to dislodge her from the throne. She becomes to them, "the black goat" which must be chased in to roost early before it destroys valuable barns in its night prowl (42). Iyase describes her as "the new wine that intoxicates, sending our women to run amok on the streets, throwing their dignity behind". He is therefore, expressing men's position when he vehemently declares:

"... Water can never flow from the foot to the head.
We are the head. Women can never rule us...(TROW, 56).

The designation of characters in the play is a vital dramatic device. "Wazobia" is derived from a combination of Yoruba; Hausa and Igbo words for "come". That means wa-zo-bia respectively. Apart from suggesting the imperative of co-operation across ethnic, cultural and geographical frontiers in the struggle for democratisation in Nigeria, Wa Zo Bia, meaning, "come" can be seen as the call of a crusader (the playwright and the characters) to other members of the polity especially women to join

her campaign against gender disparity and for genuine social change. This is because democracy will be elusive in a society where half of the population is estranged or alienated from governance.

There are three characters bearing each of the syllabic constituents of the heroine's name. They are Wa, Zo and Bia. The creation of this propinquity shows Wazobia as an aggregation of the interests and potentials of women. She represents the synthesis that could be achieved in power imbrication from the thesis of Zo and Bia who are loyal to the throne and to women's cause. In her, one can also see the antithesis of Wa (in association with Anehe) who holds Wazobia and her reformatory praxis in malice and consequently works with men to depose Wazobia. Herein lies the sense in Omu's assertion after her conversion to women's side that "Wazobia is "us."/ We are Wazobia / Together we stand (TROW, 52).

To underscore the sublimity of Wazobia's character, Onwueme creates a community of contrasting men who trail her in political acumen, bravery and vivacity. The notion of masculinity created is distinguished by duplicity, deceit, cowardice, treachery, violence, greed, arrogance, intolerance and dithyrambic passion. The men are vigorously against the whiff of change in the male dominated structure. Idehen laments the new order of freedom championed by Wazobia as a corollary of Christianity, Western education and colonialism in a manner reminiscent of the nostalgic lamentation of Okonkwo and Obierika about the social dislocation in

Umuofia as a result of the powerful intrusion of western culture in Chinua Achebe, s *Things Fall Apart* (124-25).

One can perceive Onwueme's notion of masculinity as represented in the man who beats his wife, in Iyase and Idehen who plot to be king and in the mob of men struggling to overthrow Wazobia. In this community, only Ozioma is the "voice of reason" that is sympathetic to the women's cause. But other men who capitalise on his stranger status in the kingdom to denounce him as Wazobia's wrapping cloth easily overwhelm him. Consequently, what is constructed in the play is a deconstruction of masculinity toward rendering its domination of power illogical, unnecessary and overdue for change. For instance, Idehen is presented as being unboundedly ambitious and treacherous. He aligns with Iyase to fracture the new-found solidarity among women through divide-and -rule method, with a view to trading off Iyase after winning the crown. The treachery is made shocking when one considers the fact that both men are friends and chiefs in the cabinet of the late king. After planning with Iyase, he goes to betray him to Wazobia.

Perhaps, Bia sums up the picture of men folk in the play when she remarks "men tread and tend crooked paths" (47). They are depicted as vandals who have presided over centuries of misrule. Expectedly, women become the purveyors of peace whose urgent intervention is needed to achieve equilibrium. Thus, the women of Ilaa try to beat men in their own game by draping them (men) in the puerile cloak that men used to reserve for women. Hear Wazobia:

For three seasons, Wazobia has reigned
 Three seasons, just THREE seasons
 And men are sweating in their anus
 I have only intervened here three seasons
 Only three seasons *wiping their nose,*
Cleaning their tears
 And now they want me to step down (emphasis added).
 (TROW, 3).

Consequently, while Wazobia and the women are lionised, the men are presented as tactless, planless and ruthless.

Omu's character is important in the depiction of the familiar tension between tradition that denies women their basic human rights and modernity that protects them. Omu initially illustrates the truth in Kristeva's submission that "women, given access to position of power in a male dominated system, may be taken up into the defense and justification of the system itself" (470). Omu is a zealous defender of tradition qua tradition. She is encumbered by traditionalism, which is a stubborn commitment to traditional precepts and customs even when such practices have lost their relevance and importance.

OMU: Tradition. Tradition as we met it. Tradition passed
 down to us from the time when the world's eyes
 were still closed. Tradition handed down from
 generation to generation. (TROW, 22).

This stagnant conception of tradition is similar to that of men folk, hence her initial identification with men's position. Omu will not be a party to the death of tradition,

which Wazobia is pursuing through her refusal to allow the women to participate in the widowhood rites. She sees Wazobia's reforms as needless, hence, her skepticism.

But the play climaxes with Omu's conversion into the crusade of Wazobia for a new era of increasing recognition for women and their potentials. She admonishes the women in feminist parlance to 'make a meaning out of their lives with or without men. Omu's character is therefore, relevant in Onwueme's presentation of the contrasting gender worldview. After conversion, Omu becomes the commander of women's naked legion, to defend the throne under Wazobia. She leads the women to adopt nudity, which women in some societies of Africa (the Yoruba for instance) over the ages employ as a weapon of protest when in conflict with an oppressive state and its policies. It is an instrument of counter-power, which can drive a powerful male ruler away. Omu in demonstration of this power galvanises Ilaa women to form an arc around the throne as a symbolic protective shield toward the consolidation of nascent female ascendancy. She explains the essence of this traditional expression of non-cooperation:

This naked dance is a last resort women have had over the ages. If our men force us to the wall, we must use it as our final weapon. Unusual problems demand unusual solutions (TROW, 53).

Among the Igbo communities of the Delta where the play is set, each community has acknowledged heads, one male the other female. The male is the Obi

who is accepted as the overall head of the community. Omu is the female head who ministers to the grievances of women folk. She is also crowned like the king and she has her own team of advisers. As Acholonu explains, the Omu performs economic, political and spiritual functions. Apart from propitiating the spirits of the market on behalf of the community, “she effects boycotts against a recalcitrant male community including the king” (35).

The transformation in the character of Omu illustrates the pattern of social change being advocated by Onwueme – from acquiescence with patriarchy to female ascendancy. The play projects democratic vision especially through the solidarity and communal spirit existing among its womenfolk in the struggle for freedom, equity and equality.

One vital area in which gender disparity is pertinent is the language. Language, undoubtedly the jacket of reality, provides the medium by which cosmic experience can be re-constituted. Onwueme tries to transpose men into the “other” with which women have hitherto been identified. Hence, there is a recurrence of “we” in reference to women as against “they” (men). Intra-gender co-operation among women is achieved through the creation of a community of shared aspirations as denoted by such personal pronouns as “we” and “us”.

In the dialogue, sex organs are used as emblems of identity and difference between the sexes. It is a symbol of power and advantage for men and passivity on the part of women. But the women of Ilaa who employ nudity as part of the strategies to

“de-power” the men folk and liberate themselves reverse this at the end. Iyase while mocking Idehen illustrates this sexual trope and its implication for empowerment:

Get the pieces of yourself together man. Or has
Wazobia so shattered you that she has crushed the balls
between your thighs? Has Wazobia empowered herself with
your manhood? (TROW, 38).

Besides, the catachrestical usage of second person pronoun “he” / “she”, “him” / “her” and the frequent reference to Wazobia as “lord”, “master”, “king” and “husband” (masculine nouns) by the women are key elements of gynocentric rhetoric in the play especially in the bid to problematise the identity or character of Wazobia. The ambivalence, confusion, contradiction and paradox that define gender contestation are also evident in the above techniques. The women’s attempt to wrest power from the hands of men necessitates a reversal and re-constitution. The enlargement of linguistic possibilities through catachresis is therefore, a way of responding to and coping with the demands of this re-constitution. Expanding the range of meaning of words to accommodate new reality, in itself, is like expanding opportunities for the hitherto under-privileged or repressed. After all, in the theatre, both linguistic and social arenas are dialectically related. A few illustrations will further illuminate this submission:

WAZOBIA

... The *king* will not allow *Himself* to be dragged
into the mid of your prejudices.
He, the king She is beyond man or woman
The king has therefore gathered you to make
this pronouncement... (TROW, 29).

Here is another example of identity fusion with seeming confusion:

ZO

Tell me first, what is wrong
With our *king* and *Husband*?

BIA

Nothing serious. *She* is just tired (TROW, 48)

It continues:

BIA

We must not tell the *king*. *SHE...HE...*is upset already.

ZO

I know, I could sense that when I first entered.
Do you think *he* knows already? (TROW, 51).

The examples underscore the fact that gender differences are mutable abstractions that are often socially, rather than biologically constructed. But beyond this, the experiment has its cultural provenance when one considers the tradition of “female husband” in Igbo culture. A woman of wealth and influence may decide to transcend the ordinary social limitations of her sex by taking on men roles and traditional titles in addition to the female ones. Such a woman will marry “wives” who bear children through men and the children bear the name of the wealthy woman, as she is the “husband”.

In view of this, Wazobia can be regarded as a woman who has transcended gender limitations to function as a man in social, political and economic dispensations.

In a sense, the strong gender wedge constructed by the society in its governance is deliberately undermined through this linguistic experimentation.

As a play that is steeped in inter-gender struggle, invective, lampoon and banter are elements of social interaction as expressed in its dialogue. They are used for reciprocal denigration by both sexes. To assert male superiority, women are repeatedly referred to with the adjective “mere” as demonstrated below:

IDEHEN

...A chief they call me who can stand on two feet and ten toes and allow a woman, a mere woman, clear her rotten throat and spit the phlegm at my face? (TROW, 37).

The same conceit or condescension is noted in the exchange below:

IYASE

(Sarcastically): Perhaps this morning, our king has taken a shot of gin too many. It may be necessary for *him*...

IDEHEN

For HER!

IYASE

(Chuckling): it is only women who see stars with a few cups of gin (TROW, 29).

Unfortunately, the rhetoric of the women especially Omu and Wazobia in their bid to persuade sometimes degenerate into mere propaganda, sloganeering and pulpit oriented homilies as demonstrated in Movement Three.

In summary, Onwueme has through a gynocentric artistic persuasion, responded to the democratic imperative. The aesthetic option becomes compelling

because according to her, “in view of the long mountains of opportunity erected by societies to impede the high mobility of women, I cannot but push for women to strive for equality with men” (Appendix C). From the manner of resolving the conflict, Onwueme’s position illustrates anti-sexist sexism⁶ which omits to lay the needed emphasis on inter gender co-operation as a desideratum in modern theory and practice of democracy. No democratisation project can succeed without the full and complementary participation of both sexes. Indeed, such a project is doomed to fail if it privileges one group or sex against the other. This postulation serves as the basis for gender complementarity toward democracy, which John Pepper Clark advocates in *The Wives’ Revolt*.

The Wives’ Revolt.

If the tenor of the argument in *The Wives’ Revolt* is anything to go by, J.P. Clark can be classified as one of those male writers (dramatists) who cross gender boundaries in their creative endeavour. Such dramatists examine the issue of social injustice under an undemocratic polity from the perspective of the supposedly “second sex”- woman. Consequently, they become in the words of Onwueme, “creative transvestites” in their writing.

The image of the African woman portrayed in this play is that of a being who can successfully challenge the mores of patriarchy and bring about a truly democratic society where the two sexes co-exist as complimentary partners and stakeholders.

Such a harmonious order will require the removal of socio-cultural encumbrances that account for gender imbalance.

The form of *The Wives' Revolt* is remarkable for some reasons, which are worthy of attention. First, the play departs from the familiar image of women as portrayed in Clark's dramatic oeuvre prior to its production in 1991. The growing concern with "womanity" in Nigerian literature might have inspired this re-direction of artistic concern. He is more sympathetic and sensitive to the status of women in the social network unlike what obtains in plays like *Song of a Goat*, *The Masquerade*, *The Raft*, *Ozidi* and *The Boat*. The portrait of Koko, who represents Erhuwaren women in *The Wives' Revolt*, is quite different from that of Ebiere, Zifa's wife in *Song of a Goat* whose matrimonial success is threatened by her husband's distressed reproductive capacity. The image is more dignifying than that of Oruko-rere, Zifa's partially demented or perhaps spiritually possessed aunt. Moreover, despite the claims of Erhuwaren men folk to the contrary, the women in the comedy are not "witches", like Ozidi's grandmother in *Ozidi*. Thus, stereotypes and prejudices, though featured, are mediated in *The Wives' Revolt*.

Second, the play charts a different course from the pro-classical tragic mode often explored in Clark's theatre⁷. According to its blurb, the play is "Clark's first comedy in twenty-five years of playwriting".

Third, the simplicity and lucidity of its reportorial style is unique. Equally remarkable is its experimentation with fewer characters and less spectacle in

articulating the playwright's concern with democratic governance in Nigeria. This is unlike the aesthetics of 'total theatre' which feature in the plays of Rotimi and Osofisan with similar thematic concern.

The Wives' Revolt depicts among other things, the conceit of men in their economic exploitation and political exclusion of women. The domestic quarrel between Koko and Okoro her husband and its resolution in a way that guarantees future harmony in the community are elements of comedy appropriated to serve gynocentric end. But apart from that the play explores performative elements of udje song poetry of the Urhobo. Among the Urhobo of Delta State of Nigeria udje, according to G.G.Darah is "a classic of dance and poetry against which is measured most of the dance and poetic forms" (504). Udje artistes source their compositional materials in inter-community rivalry or domestic quarrel. The performing groups are paired in opposition with the objective of each group being to "sing its rival to a fall" (505). The tense, combative and provocative mood of *The Wives' Revolt* is reminiscent of udje narrative songs (Ileshan), which often feature a clash of rival dancing groups or a verbal brawl among couples. In that context, participants see the performance arena as a "battle ground from which they must return triumphant" (506). As a result, the intensity of opposition and the ingenuity of composition manifest in the performance.

The play also exhibits the gaiety, hilarity and pugnacity of udje performance. The parrot-like verbal dexterity of the singers, their gestures, voice inflection,

ingenious analogy, topical allusion and mouth-widening exaggeration are elements of udje adopted by Clark. However, whereas in udje, the altercation is reported through songs, the audience can see on stage the quarrelling couple in *The Wives' Revolt*.

Through the prism of age-long battle of wills between the sexes, Clark presents the problem of gender inequality and how it can be addressed in a democratic atmosphere. The domestic dispute between housewives of Erhuwaren and their husbands signposts the struggle by women for inclusion in a political configuration that essentially excludes them. The play reminds us of *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes. In this classical Greek comedy, the community of Athenian women led by Lysistrata adopts the method of sexual abstinence to compel the men folk to end the raging Peloponnesian war. It is a mixture of fiction with historical reality.

The housewives in Clark's play are able to extract a 're-cognition' of the import of complementarity in gender relationship as sine qua non of democratisation. Men are made to review their domineering attitude and realise the limitations of policies that advance female subordination. The play ends with an affirmation of the women's right to freely associate, own property, freely express themselves and have as much access to the community's resources as their male counter-parts.

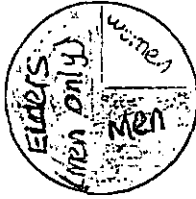
However, the play has a broader reference beyond its gender concern. It features the plight of oil-producing communities of Niger Delta and the politics of minority ethnic groups battling for the control of economic resources against other federating units. Also decipherable is an underdeveloped economy (like Nigeria)

pitched against the exploitation of agents of Euro-American interests like shell, Chevron, Texaco, Total, Elf, Agip and other multi-national oil companies. The domination of the offshore oil business in Nigeria by these companies put in their control, a vast proportion of revenue accrue to the country from oil and consequently facilitates the control of Nigeria's economy by foreign interests.

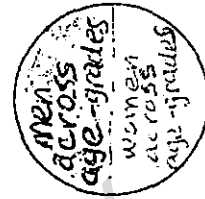
The crux of the domestic feud in *The Wives' Revolt* is the money paid by the foreign oil company operating in Erhuwaren. The money is, perhaps, paid in compensation for the devastation of the community's ecology due to oil prospecting activities. The issue in contention however, is the appropriate formula or ratio to adopt in sharing the money equitably among the people. The formula proposed and adopted by the Elders' council sparks a row by dividing the money into three equal parts, giving one part to the elders, one to men across age grades and the third part to women across age grades. To the elders, it is "a most fair and equitable settlement"⁸. But to the women, it is not, because it privileges the men, its proponents and executors as they are allotted two-third of the total sum. It leaves only one-third for the women.

The adoption of the proposal queries the democratic claim of the decision-making organs of the community represented in the Elders' council and the General Assembly. At the basis of the gender dispute are issues of freedom from domination and women's rights to participate in governance in all its ramifications like men. Consequently, in place of the unequal formula, the women demand that the unspecified amount of money should be divided into two equal halves – one for men

across grades and the other for female across age grades. This will place both sexes on equal pedestal.



Men's adopted proposal



Women's demanded option

The mutually vehement rejection of the “other” position clearly shows the conflict as that between advocates of equality and inclusion on the one hand (women) and defenders of domination and exclusion on the other (men). In pressing home their demands, the women abandon their domestic duties and thereby cause a great dislocation in the social order. They quietly walkout on their husbands in a manner that enhances the enigmatic and complex nature of women. It also shows that men, however much they claim to know about women still have a lot to learn judging from Okoro's ignorance about his wife's disappearance along with other women in scene III.

Because of the challenge posed to the redoubtable male hegemony, and in view of the need to bring back under control the rebelling women, the exclusively male Elders' council enacts a decree outlawing the rearing of goats (evwe) in the community and empowering any member to confiscate any such animal seen after the

expiration of the ultimatum given. Women are accused of using witchcraft to metamorphose into goats and torment their men. The target of the decree ostensibly is the economy of the female group as only women rear goats for commercial purposes. Men rear pigs (esi) instead and their animals are not affected by the enactment even though pigs constitute a menace to the agricultural resources of women. This is the law that Okoro, the town crier is proclaiming on the streets of Erhuwaren when the play opens.

The subsequent antagonism against the law dismissed by Koko as "obnoxious" and downright unfair exposes the inadequacies of the legislative process and the absurdity of the product of the process and its implementation. For instance, from Koko's fervent opposition and Okoro's spirited defence, Clark establishes that the law-making organ of the community is not as democratic as it claims. Women who constitute a significant part of the population (probably half) are not represented in the supreme legislative body, the Elders' council. They are inadequately represented in the General Assembly. How then can one consider the legislation fair and just when those to be affected by its implementation are denied fair representation in the legislative process?

The play also shows that the law is a unilateral decision by men. Such a unilateral action is not likely to consider exhaustively the ramifications and wider implications of issues involved in the ban. It is clear that thorough debate is not entertained to weigh all possible opinions and consequences as expected in a

democratic assembly. In the General Assembly where women are allowed to have their say, women, apart from being under-represented are not allowed to freely articulate their viewpoint due to hostility and molestation from men. That is not the only blot on the anti-goat edict. The responsibility for its execution, according to the proclamation rests squarely on men. Non-compliance with the prohibition order “will attract the penalty of immediate forfeiture of the animals in whatever numbers to the community at large, *any member* of which shall be free and entitled from that point onward to seize and dispose of the said animals in any manner that *he* may deem fit without any encumbrance whatsoever” (emphasis added) (TWIR, 3).

The gender neutrality of “any member” notwithstanding, it is clear that the envisaged beneficiaries of the expropriation are men. Women presumably are most unlikely to be part of the assault on fellow women’s economic interest within this context. It is therefore, instructive that Okoro implements the anti-goat law with ineffable avidity like many other men.

Furthermore, the legislation is faulty from the beginning because it is based on defective premises leading to awkward conclusions. From textual evidence, Kama and Ono, husband and wife, are engaging in a quarrel. Kama who slips and fall during the fight believes that Ono who has metamorphosed into a goat through witchcraft attacks him. Therefore, all goats are believed to be capable of being used by every woman as instruments of witchcraft and must be banned.

The argument above exemplifies the fallacy of hasty generalisation as attested by Okoro's pith:

But now, that we know they also provide refuge for forces of evil, oh, yes, that whenever there is a herd of goats there is a coven of witches, our immediate and mandatory duty to the community is to see them safely out of town (TWIR, 7).

Apart from this, the 'offender' here are women who are the target of male aggression. The banned goats are impliedly guilty by association as goats are domestic animals being reared by women.

From the verbal warfare between Koko and Okoro, Clark demonstrates that Erhuwaren's traditional system of governance contains traits of tyranny despite its seeming democratic nature. Apart from the exclusion of womenfolk, legislative, executive and adjudicatory responsibilities are conferred on or appropriated by men. Clark contends that the instance of a group of people meeting and issuing proclamation at the end of it without due regard to the interest of other groups (here, women) is antithetical to the tenets of democracy.

Consequent upon its undemocratic nature, the political system in Erhuwaren fails to mediate the crisis by addressing the source of conflict. The law made rather than guaranteeing harmony aggravates the tension, hence, the women's declamation in scene II (Dissent) and the practical demonstration of their discontent by fleeing their homes in scene III (Walk-out). The vacuum created from the 'walk-out' brings to light, the inadequacies of men. It also hints at the problematic of political actions or

policies capable of alienating a segment of the community, however insignificant in a true democracy. Expectedly, the wives absence takes its toll on socio-economic activities in order to underscore the significance of women and the import of inter-gender co-operation. Men are compelled to combine economic activities with domestic chores like cooking, laundry, environmental clearing and child tending. The reproductive capacity of the community is equally disrupted alongside its economy. The absence of those with breast milk portends a frightening threat to the very existence of the community itself. As Okoro rightly remarks: "those with full breasts have walked out...It is the dry season, child" (TWIR, 27). The metaphorically dry season gradually leads men to an awareness of the void in their lives, and that without the so much despised women, men will "remain half and half in an incomplete world" in the words of Idama (52).

At the climax of the social-economic dislocation, Koko (like other wives) returns from the protest march with a sad story. All the returnees are infected with cross-piece; a dermatological disorder contacted at Iyara, Okoro suspects that Koko contracts it from illicit sex in the course of the women's wandering, thus, accusing her of infidelity. Koko joins the heightened protest of the returnees against men's oppression. Men now have no option other than to accede to their wives' demands to abrogate the offending law that has widened socio-political and economic cleavages between the sexes and compensate women for the injury suffered as a result of its implementation. Arrangements are also made for the inoculation of the women against

the infection. However, the oil money at the centre of the conflict is not sufficient to make any significant alteration in the quality of people's lives as individuals or as a community. They decide to invest it on the education of their children, education being the weapon against social injustice. The town is re-united in the spirit of comedy; the hard line posture of the two sexes is eschewed as no side benefits from it. These form the substance of Reclamation by the town crier in scene VI. This scene establishes the moral lessons of the play - the importance of debate, respect for people's rights and the virtues of co-operation beyond gender partition.

Apart from his gender sensitivity, Clark also portrays the crisis of confidence that characterise the relationship between Nigeria's Federal government, the oil companies and the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta region. In a way, the appropriatory tendency of the Elders' council echoes that of the Federal government and the oil companies. Speaking through the Town crier, Clark insinuates that the oil from Niger Delta "continues to flow to enrich other people across the country" (TWIR, 60). The revolt of Erhuwaren women is somewhat an endorsement of revolt on the part of the oil communities (ethnic minorities) who are as underprivileged as the revolting women, to combat economic domination and exploitation. Clark perceives an oblique hierarchy of exploitation in the oil politics in Nigeria. Women in the oil-producing areas are at the base of the exploitation. The men, who are themselves victims of exploitation, exploit women. Men are in turn exploited by the ruling elites of the oil producing states. The ruling elites are victims of exploitation by

the Federal government, which appropriates oil revenue on behalf of the federating units. Multi-national oil companies who actually carry out the oil exploration exploit the Federal government itself.

A closer scrutiny of the structure of the play reveals that it accommodates the transition of the community from its initial authoritarian formation into a more democratic social order that recognises the indispensability of the two sexes. It opens with proclamation of the controversial edict and ends with its reclamation, in order to pave the way for widened democratic opportunities. It starts on the street and ends on the street. The last scene douses the unrest that engulfs the community at the beginning when Okoro announces the peace agreement. The four scenes in-between the two poles, each with revealing titles present significant signposts in the course of this transition. The transition is marked by aggression, protest and antagonism, but both sexes are endangered while the tension lasts. The men at home experience hardship in coping with domestic duties, the women too suffer considerably as they are forced to flee from home and also contract infection in the process.

The opening scene – Proclamation – prepares the audience for the confusion that will subsequently dominate the atmosphere. Okoro's gong as it pierces through the auditorium is a technique to halt private discussions among spectators before the play commences, though in reality, it is a device in traditional African societies through which the town crier secures attention of members of the community before passing across the king's message. The Reclamation eliminates the source of

confusion and restores harmony. Both proclamation and Reclamation are set on the street, but there is a logically corresponding shift of the action from the street to the home of Okoro.

Okoro's house presents a typical battle of the sexes. It is like the screen on which the playwright unfolds a struggle for power and resources among the men and women of Erhuwaren. Amidst conflicting claims about the fair sharing formula for the oil money and about the veracity of the circumstances leading to the branding of goats as coven of witches, a pattern emerges - Koko valorises women and denigrates men while Okoro expresses stock prejudices about women. The antagonism explodes in the next two scenes – i. e. Walkout and Lullaby. The physical absence of women in the two scenes hypothesises about a world without the 'other' sex. As the experience of men show, it will be a chaotic world. The crude and clumsy efforts of Okoro and Idama to cope manfully with the situation only serve as a dramatic reinforcement for the image of women as inexorable part of a large whole. Having been mutually exposed to hardship, it becomes imperative for men and women to seek a restoration of social equilibrium distended by men's action and women's reaction. The return of women in scene V signals the gradual return of domestic peace and public stability. The action thus, moves from Okoro's house back to the street in the final scene, a public space where a broad segment of the society is represented. The scene is a departure from the previous hostility and thereby encapsulates the kernel of Clark's polemics.

The Wives' Revolt shares the spatial setting common in Clark's plays, including the recently produced *All For Oil*. That is, the Niger Delta region in contemporary times. The contemporaneity is established in the director's note: "A street at Erhuwaren early one evening in the Urhobo area of Nigeria in recent times" (TWIR, 1). Though Clark's father was an Ijaw, his mother hailed from Urhobo land. In Nigerian politics, the Ijaw (Izon) are a people close to the Urhobo in friendship and enmity, judging from the frequent inter-communal clashes between the two tribes of late. The underdog perception of the oil-producing region parallels the underdog status of the Erhuwaren women and by implication, women in the scheme of democratisation in Nigeria. The fictional Erhuwaren in the play stands for any town in the oil producing areas that experiences the same problem of oppression, just as the women's plights articulated by Koko demonstrate the discrimination or inequality often experienced in politics and governance.

In Urhobo culture, there exist traditional tendrils of gender imbalance as evident in the play. A woman who is accused by her husband of having grievously offended him must offer a sacrifice to the ancestors. The same propitiation is however, not expected from a man who offends his wife (50). Beside, the wife is not supposed to argue or debate with the husband who is her 'lord' and who 'owns' her.

Through the reportorial and descriptive power of the characters, the audience are linked with the universe of Erhuwaren and its neighbours. They follow the movement of the army of revolting women, (through Idama's narration) from

Agboginame to Otu-Jevwen, Ighrwre Akan, Ejophe, Imode and Okwagbe. In the narrative, Clark creates in the audience's imagination a contrasting setting in Iyara, which is like a foil to Erhuwaren. Whereas Erhuwaren at the moment is hostile to women's cause, Iyara ironically with more hostile condition in terms of hygiene, provides attraction and succour however brief for them. Iyara is a community that is acutely despised and conceitedly dismissed by Erhuwaren because its architectural ugliness and unhygienic environment make it repulsive a place to dwell in. Yet, the women embrace it in the course of their flight. Iyara in Urhobo means a deep pit or gully. According to Okoro, it is a "disease-ridden, poverty-stricken town without sense" (TWIR, 5). Okoro later describes it as "that hole of a place, all houses half-finished, earth worms at one end, and their floors running with gutters as house in Isale Eko" (44). On another occasion, it is "that crummy, scurvy, scabies-ridden crowd called Iyara (48). These repulsive images of Iyara make the women's flight unbearably painful and insulting to the men who would have preferred that their wives register their protest in a less humiliating manner. The choice of the setting, therefore, facilitates the softening of the hard line position of both sexes.

The political system in Erhuwaren is not democratic. The society is divided into the ruling group (men) and the ruled. The conflict in the play is between the ruling group that controls organs of law making, decision implementation and adjudication, and those who are disadvantaged by the political arrangement and seek to terminate it.

The conflict is woven around three people – two men (Okoro and Idama) and a woman (Koko). Each of the characters represents tendencies in the political conflict already identified. While Okoro represents the patriarchal viewpoint, Koko articulates the rejection of female otherness. Idama, Okoro's friend portrays a mediatory and tempered fusion of these extremes. It is the conciliatory option, which he advances that is adopted in order to end the impasse.

The paucity is a deliberate theatrical technique usually found in the Theatre of the Absurd. For example, it is employed in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *End Game*, Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* and *The Bald Soprano*. The style is also a notable feature of "The Two Handers" or "Cockroach Theatre" of South Africa under the apartheid system. Example are found in Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, *Sizwe Bansi is dead* and *The Island*. It is also explored in *Woza Albert!* by the trio of Percy Mtwa, Mbogeni Ngema and Barney Simon. However, *The Wives' Revolt* is clearly not a product of the philosophical cynicism and existential anguish that gave rise to the Theatre of the Absurd in post-World War Europe. The reality of Nigeria when the play was written was not as severe as the socio-political deprivation and artistic repression that inspired the Cockroach Theatre under the apartheid. One question that arises from this is that what informs the choice of the device by Clark in the play?

The reason can be located within the broad spirit of innovation in Clark's dramaturgy in particular and in Nigerian literary drama in general. The feminine perspective is as novel as its innovative manner of realisation. Here, crowd scene,

elaborate spectacle, music, dance and other primary elements of 'total theatre' are missing. "Voice drama" as Dapo Adelugba calls it⁹, rendered in poetic prose with fewer actors is not without traditional provenance. The style is an element of African "chant theatre". Within this context, chants, evocations or even ritual performance by few artistes or initiates is a possible option. The burden of the performance rests squarely on the verbal dexterity of the chanters rather than on spectacle.

Apart from the foregoing, the style is also an evidence of influence from the performance mechanism of udje song poetry, especially the stormy exchange aspect. This option departs from the communal participation approach of "total theatre", the type employed by Osofisan in *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* among other plays for instance. But the experiment is not without its own limitations, as *The Wives' Revolt* is robbed of spectacle, a vital theatrical element that assuredly delights Nigerian audience and through which the play's signification can be strengthened.

Okoro the town crier who is also a trader is the mouthpiece of the reigning hegemony. He is the "voice of the state" and the vehicle for information dissemination in a traditional African society. Like the modern day mass media, he is the official outlet for articulating state policies to the citizenry. It is the proclamation he makes that sets the tone for subsequent actions especially the women's protest against policies outlined in the proclamation. In a nutshell, he embodies the sentiments and prejudices of Erhuwaren men against their women folk. His wife Koko constantly assails these sentiments on behalf of other women.

The friction in Okoro's family typifies the fractured relationship in the community. Ordinarily, spouses are expected to be united, but Okoro and Koko are sundered by sexual prejudices. The tension generated from this reality provides a veritable framework for challenging patriarchy in particular and authoritarianism in general. The tension also anticipates the emergence of a more liberal democratic order as witnessed in the resolution of the play. For instance, men are suspicious of the esoteric power of witches (witchcraft is basically a women's cult aimed at equaling the temporal and spiritual powers of men) represented in the black goat. The hostility usually visited on witches are visited on the goats though the primary targets are their owners – women. Okoro insistently advances men's position and justifies the legislation against goats. Koko, like every woman or housewife in Erhuwaren, dismisses men's position as absurd, opinionated, unreasonable and unwarranted. Consequently, both of them engage in mutual mockery and disparagement.

From the beginning to the dénouement, Clark creates a couple that hardly agrees on anything, at least, not until a consensus is struck to warrant the Reclamation. While Koko is fighting for her freedom of expression, Okoro is tired of debate. To him, "there is getting to be too much debate in the house" (11). This confirms the authoritarian propensity of Okoro. While he argues that sharing the oil money into three parts is not aimed at cheating women, but "in strict observance of tradition" (7), Koko sees it as an act of domination, illustrated in the banning of goats:

KOKO. ...Now, why won't you men accept that, in your management of affairs, you are no better than the pig that with

his snouts digs up our cassava, up-roots our yams before either is ripe for harvest, and, in spite of all this havoc it causes, still enjoys full sway over our lives? (TWIR, 9).

Okoro believes that women are not equipped for the onerous task of statecraft, and therefore, should be excused. To him, women are weak, incompetent in the management of conflict and generally unfaithful. But Koko on the other hand underscores the value of women's participation:

- OKORO. A witch in the kitchen, that's what you are.
Why don't all women stay that way and leave affairs of state to us men? Life would be so much better for everybody.
- KOKO. Life is going to be so much worse, if you don't listen to us women while making your laws (TWIR, 14).

Idama can be located in the middle of extreme positions of the couple. He stands betwixt the extremism of Okoro and the uncompromising attitude of Koko. While he shares some masculine loose thinking about women, he is still sympathetic to women's course because he sees "sense" in their agitation. He posits that compromise rather than hard-line approach can stem the tide of social unrest occasioned by the conflicting gender interest. Women's absence also exposes his slender capacity for household chores, as he breaks a pot while fetching water from the well. He humbly, unlike Okoro, acknowledges the role of women in social network. In the absence of women, he admits that men will "remain half and half in an incomplete world" (TWIR, 52).

Idama is more informed and realistic to admit that the law banning goats is a bad law. Perhaps, that is why he (Idama) does not participate in executing the “unjust” law by arresting hapless goats of fled women. He believes that men already presume women guilty, contrary to democratic tenets. He is also more reflective than Okoro. The town crier is a parrot-like character who enjoys listening to his own voice and talks more than he thinks.

One other significance of Idama is that he is used as a narrator / reporter in developing the play’s plot. His revelations provide the audience with up-to-date facts about the women’s resistance. It is through him that the audiences as well as Okoro learn about the flight of women:

IDAMA. Yes, our wives have gone; they have walked out
on us; they have emigrated in protest against our unjust law.
(He sits down on the floor, his head between his hands) (TWIR, 19).

Due to his pacific disposition, Idama supports the idea of sending a delegation after the protesting women to secure a truce so that the community can once again smoke the pipe of peace. He is unlike Okoro who defiantly condemns such a step as hasty and cowardly capitulation. Okoro reasons that disunity among women will certainly sway victory in men’s favour.

However, beyond his pacifism, Idama shares some prejudices held by men. For example, “never trust a woman” (19). Beside, though he does not partake in arresting “erring” goats, the fact that he participates in the consumption makes him in a way, guilty of oppressing the women as well. Here in lies the ambivalence of his character.

He represents the physical projection of the inner weaknesses of man to which the outward mien of toughness and stolidity is a veneer. His personality when juxtaposed with that of Okoro reinforces man's complexity too.

The politics of re-positioning the womenfolk for greater empowerment in a democratic order manifest in the play's language. Indeed, dialogue registers the confrontation from entrenched gender position and the need for reconciliation. The target of invective and scurrility that accompany the dialogue between the husband and his wife is to "sing" the other sex into submission, as the udje singers are meant to do. For instance, in his contempt for women, Okoro equates them with goats:

- OKORO Come, my friend, let the women go on their
 useless march of protest. Right now, I have some other
 character protesting attention.
- IDAMA. Who is that if I may ask?
- OKORO. It is a whole goat crying to be roasted (TWIR, 23).

He also refers to the wives as "misguided women" (40) who embark on "foolish flight" or who "ran away from home on some misguided feminine trail" (41). They are "deceitful"(43) like "the chameleon"(49). He also brands them as "witches"(35) whose mission is destruction. Thus, Okoro's speeches are marked by epigrams and analogies that reinforce men's superiority and women's subordination.

Koko on the other side is equally forceful in her denigration of male oppression. She tries to resist this through her notable *savoir-faire*. In the process, she reciprocates men's contempt. First, she strongly rejects the law passed by men as

“bad, unfair and discriminatory” (10). She also dismisses the recruitment process into leadership of the community as being flawed because it is corrupt, materialistic and undemocratic.

KOKO. And again money, no matter how it was got, will do the trick. Oh, we know who has the money has title in this land. That’s why you men are today keeping to yourselves, a great part of the money that belongs to everybody (TWIR, 6).

One fundamental aspect of Clark’s gynocentric discourse in the play is symbolism. In presenting gender conflict, pig and goat, domestic animals associated with men and women respectively are used to depict the sexes. Clark uses the two animals as symbols with socio-political significations beyond their zoological essence. Goats are accused of providing a haven for witches who in this case are women and that calls for their prohibition. Ironically, there is no legislation against pigs that destroy farmlands and agricultural products of women. It is clear from the symbolic use of the animals that there exists in the society gender imbalance. Goats are seen as weak and lack the aggressiveness of pigs, the masculine iconography. They attract less commercial value than pigs and as such, are less privileged than pigs. The discrimination put the woman’s economic and political interests as being beneath that of the man.

Viewed from another perspective, the snout of the pig is represented as a phallic image and a symbolic shaft of women’s domination. The animal symbolism is

extended further through pun and ingenious association toward depicting mutual hostility:

KOKO. You let your pigs roam at large and tear the land into pits and mounds like a place oil companies have passed through in search of new fields, and you say the *scapegoat* is elsewhere (TWIR, 10).

Okoro retorts shortly after:

And are you speaking for yourself or are all the other women as *pig-headed* as you? (Emphasis added) (TWIR, 11).

The pestle is also used as a phallic symbol and a trope of power. In her undisguised fury, Koko threatens her husband with pestle. According to the stage direction, she uses it as a weapon “in a manner most threatening to the husband” (4). The possession of this prop shows the empowerment of the woman; she now has an instrument of power and she is ready to turn it against the man and challenge his dominance. Okoro too in fury asks Idama: “Shall I slap that woman (Koko) across the mouth with my cutlass? (48). The cutlass is a weapon associated with masculinity and in this context; it is an instrument of violence to be used in curtailing the woman’s freedom of expression.

Dialogue in the play bears much of the burden of signifying as a result of the limited opportunity for spectacle. Clark uses vivid description to lead the audience imagination through the course of women’s dissension. The events mostly take place off-stage and characters merely report them. In doing this, the playwright draws from

rhetorical resources like repetition and pithy analogy to generate humour and contribute to the art of meaning. Below are two examples:

OKORO. ... Where have our wives gone, I asked
 IDAMA. To Iyara, my friend.
 OKORO. Where?
 IDAMA. Iyara
 OKORO. Iyara of the unfinished houses?
 IDAMA. Yes, Iyara of the roads that flood at harmattan.
 OKORO. Iyara of the cesspit?
 IDAMA. Yes, Iyara where rats inherit the house.
 BOTH TOGETHER. Oh, the life they live at Iyara.
 Who's not dragged off by sudden death, VD
 has dashed him to the ground (TWIR, 31).

The same style is used in the description of Igbodayen, the cause of the women's infection:

OKORO. Igbodayen of the well foaming all over?
 IDAMA. Yes, like the sluice-gates of a dam
 OKORO. Igbodayen of the well set with rings?
 IDAMA. Yes, like a well sunk at Agbabu
 OKORO. Igbodayen whose roll call for sex-
 IDAMA. is as long as the guinea worm.
 OKORO. Igbodayen who went to Aladja-
 IDAMA. And left all the men there infected.
 OKORO. Igbodayen who sat on a stool at Warri-
 IDAMA. And flies came all the way from Onitsha to feast
 (TWIR, 56).

The witty poetic repartees in the two examples above are reminiscent of the udje performance that, in the words of Clark, "makes one miserable fact of life an elaborate

fantasy to delight the mind” (TWIR, V). Witticism, melodic repetition, quaint analogy and imagery are features of udje performance manifest in the play.

Thus far, it has been shown that *The Wives' Revolt* presents the gender sensitivity of Clark's aesthetics in articulating his concern for democratic governance in Nigeria. This aesthetic option is not limited to the feminist ideation of women writers alone. Clark's gynocentricism does not conclude with the androgyny of radical feminism or western-oriented African feminist thought, which in power contestation emphasises the inversion of power formation in favour of the woman. This tendency is illustrated in Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*, though she has reviewed this stance in a subsequent play - *Go Tell it to Women*.

It is arguable that the accommodationist position¹⁰ noticeable in *The Wives' Revolt* is more beneficial to democratisation in Nigeria and in any developing nation. In its outlay of conflicts, neither exclusive male solidarity nor female solidarity can bring social harmony and progress. Development is predicated on inter-gender co-operation, for therein lies the recipe for the fulfillment of democratic quest. Gender equality and complementarities promote democracy just as democracy as a political system is more attuned to the promotion of gender equality.

The perceivable polemical differences notwithstanding, in both plays, women attain a measure of success in their resistance at both domestic (personal) and public (communal) levels. The plays create women protagonists in whom the audience can perceive “every woman” in a political formation where women are regarded as part of

the sub-altern class. In *Wazobia* and *Koko*, the two plays depict women's responses to the challenges of authoritarianism driven by male dominance. The two protagonists are presented outside and within the context of family. Both are aesthetic possibilities in asserting the woman's aspiration for adequate participation/representation in democratic governance.

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NOTES

1. For instance, Sections 16(2), 18(3e) and 41(i) of 1989 constitution of Nigeria prohibit any form of discrimination against any citizen of Nigeria on account of his community, ethnic group, place of origin, circumstance of birth, SEX, religion or political opinion.
2. Feminism as a literary and political ideology does not enjoy a homology. Various brands like radical feminism, Western Feminism; Black Womanism, Womanism and Lesbianism among others have been identified. But they are all united by the primary attention devoted to the female aspiration.
3. Onwueme's epic drama *Tell it to Women* won the drama prize of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) in 1995. Earlier, *Desert encroaches* won the same award in 1985.
4. She discloses this to me in an interview on 22nd August, 2000. See Appendix C for the text.
5. Tess Onwueme, *The Reign of Wazobia and other Plays*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educ. Books, 1992, 6. All further references to *The Reign of Wazobia* (1-63), abbreviated TROW, will hereafter be included in the text.
6. Perhaps, a realisation of the limitation of this position informs the self-re-writing that Onwueme attempts by presenting intra-gender inequality and oppression in *Tell it to Women*. In this play underprivileged women like Yemoja and Sherifat are pitched against the well-to-do and influential ones like Daisy and Ruth. She calls her own ideological endorsement of gender complementarity "S/hemanism".
7. A total rejection of classical influence altogether is not being implied. Traces of influence from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* are discernible in the play's subject.
8. J.P. Clark, *The Wives' Revolt*, Ibadan: University Press plc. 1991, 1. All quotations are taken from this edition and are acknowledged parenthetically in the text after the abbreviation TWIR.

9. Dapo Adelugba, Professor of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan uses this label in a discussion with me on Clark's theatre on 8th November, 2000.

10. The accommodationist tendency is a distinguishing element in African Feminism. As Helen Chukwuma submits in her essay, "Voices and Choices: the Feminist Dilemma in Four African Novels", African Feminism does not negate men, rather, it accommodates them, unlike Western Feminism. In her words, "Men are central to their (women's) lives and so, their continuous presence is assured" (139).

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CHAPTER SIX

MULTIPLE MASKS AND THE STAGING IDIOM OF *NWOKEDI AND THE SILENT GODS*

The option of multiple forms consciously adopted by some playwrights in reacting to the challenges of democratisation is the focus of this chapter. There is an ample use of multiple aesthetic codes in the plays studied. Somehow, they illustrate the tenets of diversity and freedom as they coalesce different artistic elements drawn from divergent sources and tendencies in their re-presentation.

Succinctly put, the range of choices for dramatic devices here is strategically vast. It is a mixed bag of some sort in which multiplicity of artistic voices and choices become the guiding norm. Technical elements abstracted from several dramatic traditions and modes smoothly collaborate in grappling with the crises of democratisation. The heteroformic aesthetic construct is therefore, a composite of theatrical forms, weaving together various elements of style, first, from the three formal paradigms earlier identified in the study and second, from the gamut of dramatic traditions in history. Its pursuit of innovation and topicality widens the range of generic possibilities through novel combinations. Its conventional circumvention of notable conventions or the common idea of play making is therefore, not surprising as it carries within it, elements of reform, departure and renewal. In this sense, it is a

kind of departure from traditional genres of tragedy and comedy explored in J.P. Clark's trilogy – *Song of a Goat*, *The Raft* and *The Masquerade* or Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* or Sony Oti's *Evangelist Jeremiah*.

It should be added that its rebellion and heteroformity do not implicate artistic disorder in the sense of 'antiplay' concept of the theatre of the absurd, even though what is depicted is essentially the chaos and disorder of national politics. Actually, it benefits from post-modernist aesthetics, not in terms of unintelligibility or meaninglessness, but in terms of orchestration of rage and violence. From Esiaba Irobi's *Nvokedi* to Ahmed Yerima's *The Silent Gods*, the audience are treated to diverse forces whose interaction in the democratisation process often provoke coercion and violence. These are some of the factors hindering the growth of democracy in Nigeria.

This artistic option gains accentuation in the works of new generation of Nigerian dramatists who started writing from the 1980s. The reason for their kind of artistic intervention can be sought within the historical and literary circumstances surrounding their emergence in the Nigerian literary space. These dramatists are writing in the post-oil boom era with the attendant economic hardship and political uncertainty. What was left was the faint "memories of our recent boom" as Kole Omotoso would say.

The democracy of the Second Republic was evidently flawed by elements of autocracy and since literature, especially drama, responds more easily to the dominant

temper of its sponsoring age, the need for an aesthetic mode that would more appropriately respond to the multiple political problems became more urgent. According to Bamidele in *Literature and Sociology*, “art forms develop in the same way as the forms of society on which they depend and of which they are the most perfect expression” (93). These writers found limiting, the art of satire alone or the persuasion of epic theatre. They also view the Nigerian political problems beyond the prism of gender contestations. Consequently, they turn in *various* directions for aesthetic influences and conventions, so long as such will articulate the depth and severity of the crises of governance. As a reading of *Nwokedi* and *The Silent Gods* shows, eclecticism becomes an admirable dramaturgical option. Esiaba Irobi, a practitioner of this art contends that eclecticism is a manifestation of the phenomenal borderlessness of the contemporary world. As he puts it, “in a shrinking and fast globalised world, eclecticism is inevitable” (Appendix E)

Nwokedi

Since its premiere in April 1987, the play has remained the most theatrically challenging of all plays written by Esiaba Irobi. (He has also authored *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* and *Hangmen Also Die*). From the political concerns of *Nwokedi*, one can safely assert that Irobi belongs to that group of writers who in the words of Bamidele, “conceived of their roles as that of vanguards in the revolution for

a better society” (26). The road to revolution in Irobi’s case may not necessarily be through inter-class confrontation or through Marx Engel’s historical materialism.

The success of *Nwokedi* is partly due to its animated engagement with contemporary Nigerian politics, its appeal to traditional Igbo performance aesthetics and its evocation of tragic pathos in the fashion of Elizabethans. The play presents a grim reading of leadership in Nigeria showing that the class of politicians represented by Senators Arikpo and Nwokedi is a class that has to be sacrificed or compelled to commit suicide for a new order to emerge. To sacrifice members of the group is to rid the society of its myriad of misdeeds and start on a clean slate. So, the two senators are created to emblematised the factors responsible for the demise of the Second Republic.

Consequently, through the sacrificial and cleansing paradigm of indigenous ritual, the play presents a logical termination of an already dicky democratic experiment. The death of the two members of the upper legislative chamber, Senate, is coterminous with the overthrow in a coup d’etat, of a civilian regime widely accused of corruption and inefficiency.

Nwokedi’s scheme of cleansing the democratic space is anchored on the religious, artistic and civic essence of Ekpe festival. The yearly festival features rites of individual and communal purification among the Ngwa people who can be found in the present day Abia State of South Eastern Nigeria. During the festival, the human universe and that of the ancestors and divinities unite in celebration of Ekpe’s

regenerational initiative. Being a largely agrarian community, the festival is used to purge the community of evil deeds of the outgoing year with a view to maintaining cosmic harmony, defined in terms of good harvest, increase in livestock, peace, prosperity and good health.

Nwokedi's discourse proceeds simultaneously at two different levels. First is the retributive elimination of two politicians for their sundry crimes, which include murder and looting of public treasury. The second is the depiction of the failure of yet another effort at democratisation with the coup. Irobi harnesses together the two levels in the dénouement with the slaughtering like sacrificial ram of the two parliamentarians. This act of redemptive exorcism symbolically affirms the death of the old order and initiates a new era. The play is in a way, a drama of revenge just as it is of struggle for radical political change. It is also a generational statement by the playwright, calling on the youths for a decisive intervention and purposive involvement in the struggle for responsible governance. Of course, there is a discernible connection between the cultural goals of the Ekpe festival in real life and the political mission of the playwright. Irobi contends that for there to be national development, a new regime must exclude the crop of politicians who "mismanaged" the Second Republic. He urges a violent revolution to sweep away "corrupt politicians" and their "evil regime" like the whirlwind. The Ekumeku in *Nwokedi* are the veritable whirlwind that resonate this *cri de couer*.

The type of 'democracy' depicted in *Nwokedi* illustrates what Stephen Ellis describes as a new form of elite competition, which is anchored, on "patron-client relationships". According to him, "one of the salient characteristics of African politics since independence has been its nature as a contest to secure resources, many of them of foreign origin, which can then be retained or redistributed to domestic supporters in a spoils system" (18).

The shedding of human blood during Ekpe, or as re-enacted in *Nwokedi* should not be seen as a cruel act of murder by a bloodthirsty youth. Rather, it is a redemptive social responsibility aimed at purging the community of the cumulative ethical blemishes of the passing year. Sacrifice is an important feature of worship in traditional African religion. It is a means of atonement for man's moral transgressions and also to secure new favour from the divine. But whether as atonement or as petition or as thanksgiving, it is believed that sacrifice ensures continuous harmony between the human and the spiritual worlds. As Awolalu and Dopamu explain in *West African Traditional Religion*, sacrifice is "a means of contact or communion between the divine and man" (132). Through it, man elicits the interest and intervention of divinity in its affairs. The same point has been made earlier by John Mbiti, when he posits that sacrifice in the traditional African society is a "psychological device to restore or maintain an ontological balance between God and man" (59). In a bid to ensure peace and prosperity, blood of animal victims like cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, pigeons, dogs and ducks are spilled in sacrifice. In extreme cases,

depending on the enormity of the transgression or the request placed before the object of worship, human beings are used as sacrifice. This much applies to Ekpe festival. Sacrifice in this context is used to purify the land against desecration of the 'dying' year.

Apart from the notion of sacrifice, other elements associated with Ekpe festival which featured in the play include song and dance, colourful costume, suspense, anxiety, tension, ribaldry, communal procession (Ota Ekpe), extravaganza, wild ecstasy and choric participation.¹ According to J. N. Amankulor, Ekpe is a culmination of all the year round rites of the Ngwa people, as it is "the Seventh and the last activities and ceremonies within the religious year" (114). The timing of the action in *Nwokedi* for December 31 coincides with the climax of the Ekpe cycle in reality. It is celebrated on that date to wash away the defilement of the passing year and usher in an unblemished new one, with its attendant blessings. The transitional moment between the old and new year offered by December 31, is quite apt considering the regenerative mission of the festival as well as the playwright's literary mission and political vision. In history, the coup d'état that ousted the government of Shehu Shagari took place on December 31, 1983. Through this coincidence, Irobi blends the religious and the artistic with the political. The coup at the end of *Nwokedi*, announced by Major General Dogon Burra recalls the role of Brigadier Sanni Abacha who announced the military take over on December 31, 1983.

The cleansing vision of Irobi informs the inter-generational dimension to the conflicts presented in *Nwokedi*. The failure of democracy is ascribed to the fact that the system revolves around old politicians like Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr. who are depicted as corrupt, greedy, incompetent and grossly lacking in innovative ideas. The youths on the other hand, are credited with vigour, vibrancy, innovativeness and efficiency.²

Immediately the “blood-red” curtain across the stage³ is drawn aside to signal the beginning of the play, the old order is severely threatened especially with the tumultuous procession and choric chants of the villagers, the cutting of the throat of a white cock and smearing its blood on cutlasses. A milieu of atonement and purification is established, even in the household of Senator Nwokedi where the Senator is administering oath of loyalty on his supporters in the aftermath of his electoral defeat.

It is the period of general election in the country when elected officials and new politicians submit themselves to acceptability test. Senator Nwakerendu Nwokedi has just failed in his bid to return to the Senate for another term. He loses his seat in the general elections, to a supposedly greenhorn Ozoemena Nwakanma (Senator Arikpo, Nwokedi’s friend and son-in-law also loses his constituency at Ugep to a dark horse much to his surprise). Ozoemena’s victory is facilitated by the general disaffection felt by the people, against the party in power. The active mobilisation of

unemployed youths by Nwokedi to ensure his father's humiliation at the polls set father and son on collision course.

The two politicians promise their constituencies employment, electricity, tarred roads and water before election but they renege on these promises. The enraged youths decide to support their own peers and displace the duo through the ballot box. The defeat aggravates tension while the two old politicians from then on steadily draw nearer to disaster until they both end up as scapegoats sacrificed for errors of the political class. The politicians remind us of 'tragos', the sacrificial goat that featured during the celebration of Rural Dionysus in classical Greece and which supplied the root word for 'tragedy' in Western literary conspectus.

To a considerable extent, Irobi shares the impatience and anger of the youths against the leadership recruitment process and its operators in Nigeria. The youths in *Nwokedi* under aegis of Ekumeku (The whirlwind) are not content with the exclusion of old politicians from governance through election. They also want their physical elimination from life because, as Obidike, one of the youths declares:

"Senators and members of Parliament are part of the rotten burden we are purging away with the old year..." (NWK, 20).

The purgative will being expressed by Obidike crystallises in the finale of the Ekpe Cycle, the moment when the old year dies and the new is born. The action is solemnised with the severance of the heads of Nwokedi Snr. and Arikpo in single stroke each. Thus, *Nwokedi* depicts two generations that are in fierce antagonism.

Members of these generations exemplify what was wrong with the collapsed democratic experiment and the playwright's vision of how to correct the anomalies.

As the action commences, Arikpo seeks refuge in the house of his friend and father-in-law at Osisioma, having lost his seat at the Senate. He is also attacked at Ugep by unemployed youths in his constituency who allegedly set ablaze his car, house, wife, three children and his parents. He becomes paranoid, constantly expressing fear about his impending end. But his tribulation is taking place against the backdrop of Osisioma's preparation for Ekpe festival, a festival that paradoxically celebrates continuity through elimination and communal survival through sacrificial destruction. The community is overwhelmed with festive spirit, including Nwokedi who is far away in Bakalori, participating in the National Youth Service scheme. Nwokedi is a scion of Senator Nwokedi, and also from the family of "strong breed" traditionally charged with slaughtering the sacrificial ram. As such, Nwokedi is eager to return home in time to participate in the festival.

Nwokedi's arrival at Osisioma is quickened by the invocation of his spirit by the 'Ufo-bearer'. He arrives into the euphoric air of Ekpe celebration, but there is a dint of the funeral within the euphoria of the celebration that makes it more significant. The tragic news of her sister's death along with her three children heightens the tension already generated by the reversal of political fortune suffered by the old politicians in the generational contest for power space. Nwokedi promptly accuses Arikpo of murdering Ezinma (his sister) and her three children and he vows to

revenge. Henceforth, he carries on with fury and disdain, not only against Arikpo, but also, against Nwokedi Snr. his father. The stage is now set for a display of retaliatory tragic impulse reminiscent of what obtains in renaissance revenge tragedy like Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet the Prince of Denmark*, Henry Chettle's *Tragedy of Hoffman*, Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* and Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*.

After a series of inter-generational test of will, Arikpo is overpowered and taken to the shrine like the animal victim in a sacrifice. Indeed, Nwokedi, achieves his contingent desires to use a man rather than an animal for the year's rites, by cutting off the heads of his father and Arikpo.

In a nutshell, youths' resistance serves as the driving force behind characters' action in the play. Death resulting from the mutual distrust and antipathy between the generations ironically restores the society to its state of equilibrium hitherto upset by the "evils" of the passing year. It is effected in such a way that the transitional gulf between the old and the new year provides an appropriate spatio-temporal framework for the desired political regeneration.

The play is divided into three "Cycles" which stand for "Acts" in familiar dramatic parlance. But the innovative departure is made significant by its reinforcement of the idea of transition. "Cycle" is derived from Ekpe celebration, which as we have acknowledged, provides the ritual foundation for *Nwokedi*. "Cycle" in the play has more artistic and political implications beyond its denotation of the

passage of time and spatial connectivity. Amankulor buttresses this point with what he calls “Ekpe Ritualistic cycle”. He shows that it is preceded in the year by other ceremonies and rituals for which it serves as a logical climax. These are: Ikpa-Unwu (April), Ira-ugu (June), Iwa-ji (July), Igba-Ogbom (August-September), Izu-Aka (October-November), Ize-mmuo (November) (115). The cyclical proceeding of events in *Nwokedi* therefore, parallels that cyclical structure of Ekpe ritual celebrations.

Apart from the above, ‘cycle’ underscores a beginning of unrest and tension, which never abates, but terminates with the reversal of democratic gains (if at all there was any) through the coup. A new democratic beginning that is supposed to be prefaced by elections is interrupted by the coup, judging from the dissolution of organs of democracy like the presidency, Council of Ministers, National Assembly and Political Parties. Though the coup d’etat at the end of *Nwokedi* can be hailed as a desirable termination of a corrupt order, the tone of the play is cautious about the nature of democracy to be practised and the alternative offered by the military in government. The caution is embedded in Arikpo’s anxiety:

ARIKPO: (distracted) In-law, these soldiers will rupture what is left of the future like a virgin’s hymen. They will perforate it with bayonets and plant bullets within that womb (NWK, 89).

The Three “Cycles” take place in different locations. The First Cycle features preparations for Ekpe festival at Osisioma. The Second Cycle at Bakalori shows *Nwokedi* at the Youth Service Camp. Evidently, the return of events to Osisioma in the Third Cycle completes the cyclical structure of the play. *Nwokedi* contributes to

the epistemology of tragedy in Modern African dramatic literature, especially through the constant use of premonitions to prepare the audience for the inevitable misfortune at the end. Characters also refer to death and blood obsessively, from the beginning to the end.

Nonetheless, in the evocation of tragedy the play makes use of familiar devices of the mode in classical and Elizabethan (Renaissance) dramaturgy. These include the superhuman potentials of the protagonist, disaster that strikes in fury at the end, intervention of music and spectacle and the use of dramatic irony. *Nwokedi* in addition shows the motif of revenge tragedy. For example, on learning about the death of Ezinna, his sister, Nwokedi accuses Arikpo of masterminding her death and he seeks to murder him in revenge. This is reminiscent of Leartes in *Hamlet* who seeks to kill Hamlet for the death of Ophelia, his sister. However, in effecting the revenge, tragedy does not overwhelm the entire stage in the dénouement of *Nwokedi* as it happens in *Hamlet*. Only those who, from Irobi's ideological viewpoint, have to die as a result of moral transgression like Senators Arikpo and Nwokedi lose their lives.

The play responds to the stimulus of unity of time, one of the neo – Aristotelian tenets of tragedy. The events depicted in all probability (save those of the flashback) take place within the 'confluence' of the old and the new year. However, the same cannot be said of unity of actions and unity of place. The former is violated by the simultaneous pursuit of revenge and political regeneration in the plot. The

latter is challenged by the fact that the actions do not take place within a single locale, but in two separate towns (Osisoma-East of River Niger and Bakalori-North of River Niger) separated by hundred of kilometres.

The two locations identified above are symbolic and deserve more attention. "Osisoma" in Igbo means "a fine tree". The name hints at the agrarian nature of the community. Osisoma is a rural community in Abia State already exposed to the vagaries and intrigues of contemporary African politics. In spite of its contact with the West, however, it still observes religious festivals and rituals that link it with its pre-colonial origin. Its serenity is violated by the aberrant nature of electioneering politics in Nigeria. The community is as politically sick and economically distressed as the Nigerian nation. However, the Ekumeku youths led by Nwokedi hold the possibility of resuscitation, through Ekpe festivals' therapeutic rites of re-birth. Mrs. Nwokedi explains the significance of the time in the ontology of Osisoma:

Today is 31st December. The old year dies today.
It dies with its thousand calamities. It was an evil
year. A year in which the rafters of our barns were
filled with shriveled tubers and the husks of life (NWK, 16).

The calamities suffered by Osisoma in its agricultural production, the pillar of its economic sustenance, represents the failings on political sphere experienced in the last year of the Second Republic (1983) in terms of electoral manipulation, arson and murder. Therefore, Osisoma's spiritual aspiration in a way merges with the national quest for political rebirth.

The tragic ethos of annihilation carries within it the seed of hope and communal redemption. This is the motivation behind the play's structure and it is underscored by the Ufo-bearer in his invocation of the spirit of Nwokedi. The invocation and Nwokedi's response from hundred of miles away is a theatrical as well as metaphysical plausibility because in the people's belief, spatial boundaries in the realm of spirits are fragile and easily crossed.

UFO-BEARER: Nwokedi, we are a peasant people, we live by the strength of our hands and the sweat on our backs. We know that what we owe the earth is toil and what the earth owes us is a smiling harvest. If in December the barns are bare and our rafters are filled with the husk of life; ... if at this moment the dry earth pants with a tired dog, what it wants on its parched tongue is a spill of blood (NWK, 39).

The absence of a "smiling harvest" from the earth witnessed in the year at Osisioma portrays the indices of a collapsed economy in a modern developing nation. There is a violation of the perfect order connoted by the name "Osisioma" as a result of the action of politicians during the year. The violation is further projected in the fatal twist in the fortune of the politicians because the festival that is a festival of life turns out to be a festival of death for Arikpo and Nwokedi snr. Aside from this, Arikpo escapes from the mob attack on his life by rampaging youths of Ugep to seek refuge in his in-law's house at Osisioma. However, the place that is supposed to be a safe haven or a sanctuary of some sort becomes Arikpo's sepulchre. The audience is adequately prepared for the reversal through the hunter-prey relationship between the

Senator and the Ekumeku. The latter treat Arikpo with contempt through their mock ritual of beheading him with machetes, sanguinary gestures and threatening songs by the Ota Ekpe. This reversal illustrates the slide of a democracy into chaos witnessed between 1979 and 1983.

Bakalori, the setting of the of the Second Cycle reminds us of the forceful seizure of farmlands and brutalisation of protesting farmers by Mobile Policemen in 1982. Bakalori in the play is used as a metaphor for failed revolution. According to Arikpo, "Bakalori is the village where some stubborn peasants were placed in Indian files and machine gunned" (NWK, 20)⁴

Peasant farmers' protest against arbitrary acts of the government also culminated in the "Agbekoya" (farmers against oppression) revolt of 1969 in Western State, a historical event that provided the story of Osofisan's *Morountodun*. Allusions to these historic acts of defiance in *Nwokedi* provide the models for Nwokedi in his agitation for social change. The memories of Bakalori (like Agbekoya and Biafra) as evoked by some characters is to blunt Nwokedi's urge for resistance and foster a cynical resignation in him. There is no doubt, however, that Bakalori provides a right setting for the depiction of tyrannical tendencies of soldiers in government and much of oomph ascribed to Nwokedi as a leader. His contempt for authority whether paternal or public is demonstrated in Bakalori, even though, there is a hint of that in the First Cycle. He is shown as a liberator who is endowed with the Promethean spirit of rebellion. He is an Ogunnian archetype who dares where his peers will not. He is a

tempestuous character with passionate rage of Amadioha in challenging injustice and moral infractions. He attacks the authoritarian characteristics of the state and deplors the marginalisation of youths. By trouncing Awado, tearing his uniform and snatching his cap (an icon of repression) Nwokedi challenges his peers to rise up in revolt against the autocratic state represented by Awado and other soldiers. Thus, *Bakalori* affords the playwright the opportunity to demystify the military just as civilians are presented as atrocious in *Osisima*.

Apart from this, martial music that heralds the coup d'état at the end is introduced in *Bakalori*. The martial music is played to signal the end of a falling regime and usher in a new era. But it is uniquely blended with the verse of Ekpe music going on in *Osisima*, so that the two musical traditions, foreign and indigenous, fluidly mingle to celebrate the end of a perverted democracy. Therefore, *Bakalori* maintains a spatial and temporal nexus for artistic effects with *Osisima*.

Irobi registers the generational perspective of leadership crises in the play's characterisation. In this regard, he shares Frantz Fanon's view that "every generation must out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it" (Appendix E). Focusing on generational differences is a way of calling attention of members of his (*Irobi*'s) generation to their historical and political responsibilities with a view to getting them to live up to these responsibilities. However, the way it is handled, the generational option is flawed by the fact that it undermines the class dimension to the travails of democracy. The youths are idealised, but there are youths like *Fingesi* who

share the moral limitations of the old political class, showing the limit to which the generational remedy to the problem of democratisation in the Nigerian context can be pushed. The mutual distrust between the youths who are contesting their marginality and the elders who appropriate the power centre is reflected in the characters as individuals and as types.

The system of inequality and injustice nurtured by old politicians is what the youths seek to “shatter” with their machetes. This task of displacing the old generation is supported by the philosophical and biological principle of regeneration. Nwokedi clearly articulates the principle when he remarks, “... if the butterfly must fly, the caterpillar must die” (NWK, 79).

Politics has become an elaborate business of falsehood. As such, Mrs. Nwokedi seeks a voluntary disengagement of her husband and his friend for peace and order to return. The refusal to disengage and the imperative of displacement make confrontation between the two “claimants” to power inevitable. The confrontation is exquisitely captured in this encounter between Senator Nwokedi and his son:

[They face each other, posed in fear and murderous anger.
The drums are progressively louder and thunderous, Nwokedi
is in the throes of trance, possession] (NWK, 70).

To buttress the youths’ hostility to the old order, they refuse to shake Arikpo’s “leprous hands that contaminates our lives daily” (NWK, 18). Of course, Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr. are part of a collective loathed by the youths. This collective includes

the law, the state apparatus to maintain it and the economic system currently being operated as well as its "operators".

That the old politicians are members of parliament is recognition by the playwright of the import of the legislative arm in determining the quality of democracy existing in a nation. The legislature is a pilot of democracy and when it is constituted by personalities like Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr. weaned on zero-sum conception of public offices, then, such a legislature and the democratic system which it is a product of and which it is supposed to serve, is bound to be perverted.

Arikpo as the name suggests, is a stranger in Osisioma community and therefore, prone to being used for sacrifice if necessary. But he is bound to the community by blood, by virtue of his marriage to Ezinna, and the community owes him a duty of care and protection. He is ironically killed by his brother-in-law, Nwokedi, in pursuit of private end of revenge and also in the service of public interest (purging the land of an evil-doer, a murderer). Arikpo's death is a kind of poetic justice as he confesses to having masterminded the death of his wife and her children to further his political course. Besides, the fact that he as a human being is used like a ram to atone for the "sins" of the people points at the severity of transgression by the people. In essence, the death implies the enormousness of disequilibrium in the order of things as experienced by the community in the 'dying' year.

By the time Arikpo is finally sacrificed, it comes no more as a surprise because he has been set on warring path with unemployed Youths in Ugep and later in

Osioma. The electoral defeat suffered by him impels him to develop a persecution complex and his concomitant paranoia accounts for premonitory remarks about blood and death. This strengthens the tragic matrix of the play:

ARIKPO: (shiffly) They are coming this way?

MRS NWOKEDI: Yes. They are coming here.

ARIKPO: Who are they coming for?

MRS NWOKEDI: They are not coming for you.

ARIKPO: (as he retreats into the passage) Are you sure they are not coming for me?

MRS NWOKEDI: They are not.

ARIKPO: (nervously) I have a premonition they are coming for me

(NWK, 16).

Apart from the electoral defeat, Arikpo's unease and anxiety can also be ascribed to a guilty conscience probably activated by his presence in the house of a friend whose daughter and three grand-children, he has collaborated in eliminating.

The character of Arikpo illustrates the portrait of an African politician who as Nwokedi remarks, "moves only in one direction... toward himself" (NWK, 80). Self-interest is the most trenchant motivation for his political career. He is held up as a contemptible signpost of democrats, because, he is like a seed of contradiction ostensibly planted in the field of Nigeria's democratisation. Here is a putative "democrat" who can aid and abet murder if that will advance his quest for power. To illustrate his parochialism and self-centredness, he conceives his membership of the Senate as a fruit of determined personal struggle against poverty and its attendant inferiority complex. It is therefore, a way of healing a bruised psyche or ruffled ego and not a call to serve larger communal interests.

- ARIKPO: I never went into the Senate to make arguments for anybody's betterment.
- NWOKEDI: What did you go there to do? To sell pistol?
- ARIKPO: No. I only went there to graft some skin on the scar itching on my psyche. The scar of poverty and its attendant inferiority complex. Nwokedi, I went into the Senate to hang my portrait on the walls of the Senate (NWK, 72-73).

Arikpo's fear of poverty is reminiscent of Okonkwo's fear of failure or being thought weak in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Just as the fear of being considered a weakling pushed Okonkwo to violate social mores like beating his wife during the week of peace, participating in the killing of Ikemefuna, and generally ruling his household with "iron hand", Arikpo has to sacrifice his wife and three children. "They are the price a man paid for power" (NWK, 88), he declares.

Perhaps, similar desperation informs his attempt to 'buy' peace by offering Nwokedi a cheque of Fifty Thousand Naira (₦50, 000.00) that the latter contemptuously tears to shred. By this act, Arikpo illustrates the belief of some Nigerian politicians in the infinite capacity of money to achieve a socio-political objective. This act of bribery or inducement which is later to be euphemised as "settlement" culture in the post-Second Republic military era tells a great deal of tales about the personality of Arikpo and the class of politicians he represents. The vehement rejection of the "tempting" offer by Nwokedi tears the cheque to pieces and promises to tear Arikpo's life to pieces too is a device by the playwright to distance the youths from the errors of the old order.

Before his death, Arikpo undergoes a brief moment of recognition when the hidden self is re-discovered and expressed with a measure of didacticism. He is made to confront the truth in its brazen bitterness:

ARIKPO: (His face strewn with fears, addresses the audience)
 Now, I know that
 Power is like a white horse
 When you are on top
 You think the ride will never end
 But with time,
 Time that trips tyrants,
 The horse gallops to a sudden halt
 And heaves. And you, the rider summersault ...
 Your head anointed with dust
 A broken name in your hands... (NWK, 88 – 89).

Senator Nwokedi too has earlier on acknowledged the truth about the failings of the system:

NWOKEDI SNR: (with maturity and urgency) we failed because
 we were selfish. We failed because we thought
 only for ourselves, our families and our tribes.
 That is why we are where we are today. That is why we
 Are trapped like prisoners in this narrow porch of history...
 We had no vision (NWK, 78).

In the two politicians, there is a subversion of the “carrier” archetype, often explored in African tragedy. In an essay titled “After the Wasted Breed...” Osofisan explains the responsibility of the ‘carrier’ as that of “symbolically ‘washing’ the place and ‘gathering’ away the sins and diseases till they are then finally flushed out, loaded with these terrible burdens, to leave the community cleansed and decontaminated for the following year” (4-5). They are like scapegoats to wash away collective ‘sins’

with their death. For instance Emman and Eleshin Oba in Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman* respectively. In these plays, the "carrier" or messiah is not dying for his own sins and herein lies the departure in Irobi's drama. Though the two politicians are invested with the "carrier" badge, the concept is undermined by the fact that they are also dying for their malevolence unlike Emman and Eleshin-Oba.

Senator Nwokedi is another character who embodies some of the moral infirmities associated with politics in the "sinking" republic. He, like Arikpo, is in politics to amass wealth, as he allegedly stashes away public money and buys houses in New York, Switzerland and London. He is also embittered by the loss of his parliamentary seat to a political neophyte, Ozoemena in a political contest. Hence, the persecution complex that he develops in the post-election period makes him to administer an oath of innocence on his political lieutenants (to establish that they did not participate in ensuring his loss). He sees everyone as working against him, including members of his household. He describes his wife as a "schemer" and "saboteur" who, along with his son, Nwokedi, is weaving out plans on how to destabilise [his] political career (NWK, 66).

Truly, his wife and son are vehemently opposed to his further participation in politics while he is bent on staying on. The sharp division in the family proves tragic at the end as Nwokedi delivers the machete blow that serves as the politician's *coup de grace*. Mrs. Nwokedi contributes to the tragedy that befalls him through the open

support for her son's political stance as against that of her husband. The convenient lies, which she tells about the decision of Nwokedi to persuade his age mate to step down merely douses tension temporarily. It ultimately widens further the gulf between father and son.

Considering the bond of affection between Nwokedi and his mother, the deep regard he has for her contrasts with the contempt he harbours for Nwokedi Snr. One notes an element of Oedipal complex that heightens the tragic temper of the play. Though Nwokedi Snr. is at the receiving end of the complex, it must be clarified that the object of contest is not so much the mother/wife's affection as Freudian psychoanalytic theory contends. Rather, it is the power space that is being struggled for by the generational filiations of the Senator and his rebellious son. The Oedipal complex, in effect, is used to strengthen the need to expose the flaws of the so-called 'democracy'

The Nwokedi family shouldered the responsibility for communal survival as a result of its role, being the masked spirit that severs the head of the sacrificial ram, and sheds the animal blood to "bury the old year with its thousand calamities". Courage and altruism needed for this significant civic responsibility flow in the family's vein. However, the year's sacrifice is quite outstanding because the family provides the "slaughterer" and the "slaughtered".

Like Arikpo, Nwokedi Snr. is a politician who can do anything, however deceitful, to stay in power. For instance, his shifty disposition is exemplified in the

way he eagerly believes the “convenient” lie told by Arikpo and Mrs. Nwokedi, about the latter’s offer to regain his seat. Thus, like the chameleon, he simply changes his garb of hostility to flattery for his son on account of the unfounded promise. He who has denounced his son as a “Renegade”, “anarchist”, “Absalom” and “mercenary” instantly turns to praise him. In his moment of ecstasy, he declares:

The boy is good. That boy is good. He is the greatest son in the world. The brightest and the finest. He is a star. A meteor (NWK, 67).

As a follow up, he quickly resolves to fulfil his pledge of providing a ram for the Ekumeku to celebrate Ekpe festival, which he has earlier cancelled as a result of his loss at the polls. It is in the same spirit of wild excitement that he turns to describe his wife as “the pillar of my life. The very brick and mortar of my existence” (NWK, 68).

This shows that to him, like many politicians, truth is constantly changing, according to the interest of its purveyor. Otherwise, why would he not mind employing thugs to burn all the files containing documents bearing the name of Nwakanma and replace them with his? In this type of ‘democracy’, are fraud, arson and violence fair means of attaining social goals?

Essentially the image of politicians as depicted in the play is reminiscent of politicians in Niyi Osundare’s “A Villager’s Protest” and “The Politician’s Two Mouths” in *Village Voices*. In “The Politician’s Two Mouths”, Osundare rhetorically asks:

Is it not the politician
 Who sees a snake
 And hails an earthworm
 Lie prostrate for a vote
 But his mind squats like a hungry dog (57).

The generational battle is fought with diatribe between father and son. Nwokedi Snr. is the frequent butt of his son's diatribe and by extension, Irobi's own anger. Indeed, Nwokedi Snr. and Arikpo represent those whom the playwright rancorously describes as "corrupt elders with no moral centre and no vision for the future". To him, such elders should not be revered, but executed. Irobi declares

I suggest that we get all our political invalids,
 shave them upstairs and downstairs, bind them
 hand and foot, put them in a leaking boat and push
 them into the Atlantic. Another option is to execute them
 by public strangling (Appendix E).

That actually is the fate that awaits the politicians in the dénouement, with the beheading of the two "political fossils". Consequently, Nwokedi is the alter ego of the playwright. Through him, Irobi articulates his visions and prejudices about contemporary Nigerian politics. To sanitise the democratic space the process involves "the slicing of a few throats". Such throats as slashed in the play are necessary sacrifice for national rebirth.

Nwokedi possesses the super-human qualities of a hero in a tragedy – courage, brilliance and great strength. Indeed, his grandeur is established in the First Cycle through other characters and the songs of Ekpe procession (Ota Ekpe) well before his

appearance in the Second Cycle. For instance in the song “Evula Agbaala Oso!” His strong personality is conveyed through animal imagery. He is described metaphorically as a ‘tiger’, while his prey is the fleeing “ram” (NWK, 97-98). The “ram” refers to the animal to be sacrificed to the spirit of Ekpe. It also refers to the politicians whom he slaughters later.

As the leader of the army of unemployed youths, Ekumeku, Nwokedi loathes the lies of electoral office seekers and their betrayal of trust. Hence, through the dramatic mechanism of flashback and play-with-the-play, an insight is provided into the hatred he has for politicians and the “sinking, rancid and swampy system” that they preside over. As he turns his machete on corrupt politicians in a bid to effect a departure from the past, Nwokedi is created in the image of African “revolutionary heroes” admired by the playwright like Samora Machel of Mozambique, Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso and Jerry Rawlings of Ghana at the beginning of his tenure as a military ruler.

As his name “Nwokedi” suggests, he is a man with grand essence and solid presence. Like the Aristotelian hero, Osioma cannot easily dispense with him. The community’s aspirations for survival, peace, prosperity and fertility are tied to the single successful stroke of his cutlass. To this end, he, in the words of his mother, “carries the collective destiny of the village in his hands” (NWK, 68). He reminds us of Othello in Shakespeare’s *Othello* who, as Iago the villain remarks:

Another of his fathom they have none
To lead their business... (1:1, 149-50).

The characters of Habiba and Fingsi in the Second Cycle strengthen Nwokedi's personality. Fingsi is for instance, created as a kind of foil to Nwokedi. Whereas Habiba describes Fingsi as a "lascivious and sexually over lubricated Casanova" who makes a pass degree in Music, Nwokedi is a First Class graduate of Mass Communication. Fingsi is a drunkard, lacking the rare intelligence, Courage and discipline of Nwokedi. Habiba further establishes this contrast when she acknowledges in Nwokedi, the attributes of her late husband who was convicted for coup plotting: stubborn, hot headed, rebellious, outspoken, courageous and daring as against Fingsi's feebleness. (NWK, 49-50).

Apart from these attributes, Nwokedi is bound to violence as a rebel and non-conformist. It is not surprising that while he is packing his load to return home from Bakalori, among the objects being packed is a dagger. This prop not only shows him as being violent but also prepared us for the vengeful/redemptive bloodletting that will take place at the end.

The revolutionary, anti-corruption and anti-establishment traits of Nwokedi are also reinforced through the flashback featuring the past of Nwokedi as a member of Buccaneer while in the University. Wearing the cultic name of Belzeebub, he extracts The supreme price from a cheat – Dafinone, the cult leader. The encounter between him and the Capone shows that he is not strange to murder. He kills the politicians just as he kills the Capone, who allegedly misappropriates the group's common

resources.

However, Nwokedi's disposition to violent anger, his conceit and the tendency to force his opinion on others, usually pursued with rage and intimidation do not show him as a democrat and herein lies a short-coming of Irobi's creation. He is much more of a dictator who is easily prone to tyranny. But his character is significant for bringing to a halt, a corrupt order to pave the way for another attempt at civilian democracy.

Nonetheless, the strength of the play lies much in the poetry of its dialogue. Poetry is used for the evocation of the gaiety of Ekpe festival, the somber ambience of tragedy and the flaggelative/purifying context of satire. While poetry can be passed off as a feature of its influence by Western tragic epistemology, it should be borne in mind that poetical effusion is a mark of Ekpe celebrations too. The poetic aura adequately prepares the audience for the catastrophe right from curtain rise through the use of repetition and dramatic irony.

"Blood", "death" and other words or concepts suggestive of destruction like "ashes", "tears", "sacrificial animal", "butcher", "burn", "raze", "shatter", "murder", "wound" and "whirlwind" among others are repeated in the play. The recurrence of these words, unpleasant as they sound, creates an overwhelming sense of a looming disaster. However, the inability to avert tragedy in the universe of the play implies the inevitability of the demise of a perverted democratic system that the Second Republic represents.

When Mrs. Nwokedi asks Arikpo when he will re-marry after the death of her Daughter, Arikpo replies, "I will never remarry. Never" (NWK, 7). Truly, he never re-marries until he dies. But the reason for that situation known to the audience is quite different from a feeling of fidelity and deep love that he tries to convey. Here is a case of dramatic irony which is sometimes effected through ingenious repetition and deliberate pun as evident in the example below:

MRS NWOKEDI: He is our in-law, He is bound to us by blood.
 OBIDIKE: (grinning). O yes, he is bound to us by blood
 UKADIKE: Senator, did you hear that?
 ARIKPO: What?
 UKADIKE: That you are bound to us by blood (NWK, 21).

The consanguinity meant by Mrs. Nwokedi is different from the sanguinary notion of blood targeted by these members of Ekumeku.

The dominant tendency in the play is to express characters thoughts in poetic forms, through the use of imagery, hyperbole, pun, repetition and alliteration for rhetorical effect. Regardless of the emotional state of characters, the diction evinces poetic sensibility. While Arikpo is reporting the loss he suffers from the hands of hoodlums in Ugep, the elegiac and the panegyric are fused in the tone of his report, achieved through repetition and exaggeration among other rhetorical devices:

ARIKPO: My house. My new house at Ugep... There were twenty-five bed rooms and seven toilets... But now, in-law, that splendid house, that magnificent house with all its beauty has been burnt. Burnt to ashes. Burnt to cinders. Burnt until there is nothing left but a heap of stones and bones. (NWK, 3).

Apart from the foregoing, the inter-generational hostility is registered in the use of diatribe. Each side of the generational divide denounces its opponent in violent verbal attack. In this regard, a grotesque portrayal of the other side through devaluative rhetoric of satire is achieved. While condescension marks the rhetorics of the older generation, uncouth name-calling, irreverence, anger and contempt lines the rhetorics of the younger generation, in the manner of the “angry young men” depicted by John Osborne in *Look Back in Anger*⁵.

Arikpo, denounces the unemployed Youths Association with venom as “The Devil’s own brigade! A miserable mob of jobless young men and women. A menace of unemployed chimpanzes. A harvest of political illiterates. Nonentities. Pieces of dirt...” (NWK, 3).

This act of lyrical abuse, eloquent name-calling and ungracious epithets is reciprocated by the Youths. To Nwokedi, his father and his generation of politicians “have been a pestilence on the political landscape of this country” (NWK, 64). But his fury makes the verbal attack more pungent and harsh:

NWOKEDI: (irate) What happened to you? You rats that
bite and blow. Trousered Apes, bloated by rancid crude
oil. Kings that rule by deceit. What happened to you?
Bats, Night’s acrobats.... Jackals, Vandals, Cannibals,
Carnivores, Scavengers. Culture vultures: (NWK, 77).

The mutual verbal assault, therefore, projects the inter-generational contest for power, which the playwright resolves in favour of the youths. Perhaps, that contest

also informs the frequent use of repartee (free flowing, quick, sharp and witty exchange), which has both technical and thematic significance in many parts of the play.

However, the elevated poetic locution of other characters (civilian) contrasts with the fractured mannerism of RSM Awado who represents the military arm of the ruling elite. His imperfect English mixed with pidgin somewhat implicates the incompetence of the institution that he represents, in the art of governance. The violence committed in the language illustrates the violence and arbitrariness that is the hallmark of living under military rule:

NWOKEDI: I don't believe in anthill mentality.
 AWADO: What? (irate) A tin of mentholatum! A tin of mentholatum: (sic) Na me you de call a tin of mentholatum?
 NWOKEDI Block head: I said "anthill mentality".
 AWADO: Sharrap. And doesn't deny! Na me, Regimental Sergeant-Major Edon Awado alias "Hannibal" You dey call a tin of mentholatum?
 (Strikes his chest) Hannibal, I don chop cattle dung! (NWK, 26.).

The humorous infractions above point at the incongruity of a man weaned on the culture of authoritarianism and violence, trying to preside over a civilian dispensation.

Beside, the lyrical appeal of the music of Ekpe festival is brought to bear on the polemics of the play. The totality of Ekpe music, song and dance enhances its communicative effect. Indeed, a consideration of the play's aesthetics will be incomplete without taking cognisance of those trenchant and topical songs. While some of the songs celebrate masculinity and power (e.g. "Ndi anyi ka aka" "Unu a

huula ndi Akporo Nwoko”), some express the dislike of youths for the perverted democracy and the forces behind it. The contest for power is, for example, rendered in the call – response titled – “Ndi ole nwe Ala na?”

SOLO:	Ndi ole nwe ala na”	(Who are the owners of the land?)
CHORUS:	Anyi nwe ala na	(The young are the owners of this land)
SOLO:	O bu Arikpo nwe ala na?	(Is this land Arikpo’s own?)
CHORUS:	Mba	(No).
SOLO:	O bu Sinato nwe ala na?	(Does this land belong to Senators?)
CHORUS	Mba.	(NO). (NWK, 102)

The ownership of land in the song is a metaphor for power space for which they are battling. Soldiers establish the veracity of the youth’s claim at the end with the displacement and physical elimination of the old politicians from power. In addition some of the songs also lionise Nwokedi and affirm his messianic traits (e.g. “Aya mme mme”, “Nwokedi”, “Evula Agbaala Oso” and “Agha”).

It is evident from the above analyses that Irobi articulates a vision of socio-political changes in Nigeria that can mediate the crises of democratisation. This is done through a deliberate “borderless” artistic devices derived from the indigenous Ekpe performance as well as a wide variety of Western dramatic traditions. Curiously, Irobi is quite suspicious of Western democracy and expresses doubt about its success in Nigeria. “It will always end up as a government of demons for demons by demons. Demoncracy”, he declares. He endorses a mixture of dictatorship with civil ethos. In his words, “the vision to change Nigeria can only be pushed through

with a gloved riffle butt or sheathed bayonet” (Appendix E). This ambivalence is well embodied by Nwokedi who easily comes across as the alter ego of the playwright.

Much as the option proffered by Irobi may be useful in addressing the questions of development and good governance, this can only be a temporary solution. Only sustained democracy can address the crises of development in the contemporary world as earlier submitted. The seemingly benevolent dictatorship advocated by Irobi is just a step away from tyranny and can easily slides into it. A democratic system, attuned to the socio-political dynamics of the Nigerian society if well administered is a better alternative to military dictatorship.

That Senator Nwokedi ends tragically is a moral lesson for the populace both as electorate and as the elected, in upholding the tenets of democracy, otherwise, the system risks anarchy and stagnation as represented in the collapse of the Second Republic. Its ending symbolises a fresh beginning, through which a departure from the old order can be ensured. The play is therefore, an apt interventional discourse in Nigeria’s unsteady politics of transition.

The Silent Gods

Although Ahmed Yerimah's *The Silent Gods* is equally motivated by a "failed" attempt at democratic rule, this time, the Third Republic, the style of its discourse and the political option presented do not share the nihilistic and cynical tone of *Nwokedi*. The dominant mood of rage and frustration is also tempered in Yerima's play. The pattern of resolving the political conflict is somehow similar. Both end with symbolic purification rites. However, while *Nwokedi*'s act of cleansing is metonymic in nature and sanguinary in its execution, that of *The Silent Gods* is metaphorical and quiescent. Beside, Yerima also draws performance elements from a wide variety of sources and traditions, ranging from the indigenous African theatre to post-modernist creations.

At the heart of Yerima's dramaturgy is a deep interest in history, both ancient and contemporary, with a view to fashioning a drama of social relevance.⁶ *The Silent Gods* is a demonstration of this interest, as it enunciates the ethos of democracy like unity, cooperation, consultation and consensus.

One major factor that has hindered the growth of democracy in Nigeria is the manipulation of ethno-geographical and religious identities especially by the elites in the competition for limited resources within the polity. (International IDEA, 89 – 105) As several scholars have observed, the manipulation makes it difficult for the civil society to unite behind a common position on governance. It becomes difficult to secure a consensus on issues of democratisation and in combating autocratic

tendencies of leaders, military and civilian. The consequence is that the ground is prepared for the termination of civilian rule. Not in so many Nigerian plays has the manipulation of ethno-national identities in politics been captured with perspicuous seriousness as it is done in *The Silent Gods*.

In broad terms, *The Silent Gods* like *Kaffir's Last Game*, another play by Yerima, focuses on the crises of development in post-Second Republic Nigeria. The play shows that political instability has been natural consequences of the inability to properly manage the phenomena of pluralism and identity consciousness.

When *The Silent Gods* was first produced in July 1994, it responded to the political debacle that attended the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential Election and the ultimate termination of the transition to civil rule programme launched in 1986. The play's concern with democratisation is dramatised through its transitional and regenerative framework. It shows the way forward from an authoritarian mode of governance towards a system that allows greater involvement of the people in political affairs. The playwright's central argument is that discrimination along ethnic, religious and even political party lines is anomalous and inimical to the pursuit of democracy. Thus, close ties among various groups need to be forged and drama can contribute to this agenda by exposing socially divisive factors and emphasising common ties. It can also do this by promoting new consciousness of democratic ethos among the citizens.

Several scholars have identified the causes of conflicts arising from the manipulation of identities (especially ethno-national identity) on democratisation. For instance, some scholars have explained ethnicity as a dynamic reality that can be historically constructed or invented, as it was the case under colonialism. Some theorists conceive it as a weapon of elites, furnished by colonialism and often explored by them in post-independence politics to gain advantage in competition for inadequate resources. Some writers like Donald Horowitz have argued that ethnic conflict is a product of modernisation. According to the modernisation theory of ethnicity, ethnic groups do not have equal access to the benefits of modernity and the uneven distribution of resources is at the base of many a political conflict in many modern nations including Nigeria. For instance, the anti-colonial demonstration of pre-independence gave way to ethnic insurgence after independence, culminating in the 1966 coup, the 1966 pogrom, the Nigerian civil war (1967 –1970) and the post June 12, 1993 election crises.

It is undeniable that identity politics has gained more prominence in the contemporary period. Though scholars and theorists of Marxist persuasion are wont to dismiss it as a diversion away from the crucial issue of class, its impact on the collapse of democratic attempts have shown that it is imperative to put it in its proper perspective, understand its dynamics and meliorate its effects. In Nigeria, ethnic and religious identities have been described as obstacles to democracy and development as they are often mobilised along with other cleavages like gender and class. Hence, they

need not be glossed over, denied or ignored, as identities are often engaged to achieve solidarity, behind a common political cause which may sometimes threaten the legitimacy of the state itself, or imperil the democratic rights of the “outer group” i.e. those who do not fall within the precinct of the identity. According to Okwudiba Nnolim, “under conditions of the politisation of ethnicity, and the use of governmental powers of inter-ethnic socio-economic competition, ethnic hostility is inevitable” (215).

A society rivened along ethnic cleavages as Horowitz reminds us, endangers democratic practice. In his words, “ethnic division strain, contort, and often transform democratic institutions” (682). This is made more so because in such a context, issues and events are easily prone to ethnic interpretations – from education to development plans, adjustment of boundaries, election and party formation, finance and trade matters, provision of social amenities and employment. (Even the military as an institution has been shown to be susceptible to identity politics). He puts it more clearly:

Ethnic division pose challenge to the cohesion of states and sometimes to peaceful relations among states. Ethnic conflicts strain the bonds that sustain civility and is often at the root of violence that results in looting, death, homelessness and the flight of large numbers of people. In divided societies, ethnic affiliations are powerful, permeative, passionate and pervasive (12).

Using Nigeria’s recent history, Yerima in *The Silent Gods* grapples with the dangers posed to democratic governance by ethno-nationalist conflict. Consequently,

despite the authorial equivocation on it in the preface of the play, the similarity between actions and events depicted and political realities during the regime of General Sanni Abacha: (1993-1998) is quite unmistakable.

The play was premiered at the National Theatre, Lagos between July 22 and 27, 1994 by the National Troupe of Nigeria, a performance organisation established by the Federal Government in 1988 under the leadership of Late Hubert Ogunde. The troupe was conceived as an avenue for promoting the rich diversity of Nigeria's cultural and artistic heritage through the performing arts. Yerima was at the time of producing the play, the Assistant Director of the Troupe.

Whereas, *The Silent Gods* is motivated by the spate of social unrest under Abacha's regime whose security apparatus had by 1994 developed a keen sensitivity for subversion, its aesthetics should not be measured in terms of its accurate reproduction of historical reality. Rather, it lies in the exploration of eclectic artistic form to mediate in the crises of governance stirred in part by the negative activation of centrifugal forces in the society by the military as a ruling class and their collaborators outside the armed forces.

In the words of the traditional story-teller who opens the play, *The Silent Gods* focuses on "the twist of life and the need to be together". "The twist of life", topical as it were is occasioned by the inconclusive transition to civil rule programme of the military. Attempts to sustain the aborted democratisation by the military through the Interim National Government and later General Sanni Abacha, efforts of

democratic elements in the civil society (like Non-Government Organisations, labour groups and some members of the political class) to protest against the annulment also added to “the twist of life”.

Consequent upon the failure of the political Transition Programme, the state of anomy that Nigeria became during the period is fictionalised in *Ilu-Oja* in *The Silent Gods*. *Ilu-Oja* is a community that is socially rivened along primordial cleavage. It is economically disoriented just as it is politically adrift. The community therefore, needs urgent re-construction both at personal and communal levels. The crisis of leadership succession in the small town broadly applies to Nigeria as a neo-colonial nation. Judging from its name, “*Ilu-Oja*” means “the market town”. The symbol of the market is employed by the playwright to express the spirit of diversity that informs the construction of Nigeria as a Federation.

Ilu Oja is a highly diffused community. As the Narrator explains, it begins from a simple economic interaction among few people only to become later, the “Great market town”. The daily interaction among different ethnic groups in urban centres is like what obtains in a market place. The rivalry, tension and acrimony that characterise relations in a multi-ethnic society occur in the market. However, amidst this acrimony and tension, the operation at the market also hinges on free exchange, friendship, tolerance, consensus and accommodation. These are required ingredients of democracy in a society if such a society will not degenerate into anarchy.

Besides, the market is an expression of diversity in the framework of a federation; a mode of political organisation adopted by Nigeria since the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954. This constitution structures Nigeria into Eastern, Western and Northern Regions, each with autonomous administration and co-ordinated at the centre by the Federal Government (Awolowo, 35).

Ilu Oja is like a federation where all parts are expected to contribute resources toward general development. A federation recognises equality in inter-group relationship and equity in the sharing of opportunities. In case of a conflict of interest between the units and the federation, the interest of the former is subordinated to that of the latter. Here, individual preferences and differences are recognised but tempered by common good. The Narrator in *The Silent Gods* espouses the principle of federalism when he provides an insight into the origin of Ilu Oja:

This is our great market square. Our town is called Ilu Oja, the Great Market Town. We grew up in the market place. First it started as a spot, one man comes from one village with his fat goat, another with his fat yam tubers. Then they exchanged oil for salt, dried fish for pepper and green vegetables. Soon they exchanged daughters for grand-children, and we decided to stay. (TSG, 11).

Through the setting, therefore, *Yerima* depicts the crises of governance in contemporary history.

It is instructive that when the play begins, a link is established, through the director's note and narrative of the storyteller, between the town's primaeval serenity

and the blissful gaiety of its present. As a result of the transition of the town's King however, there is an obvious threat to peace as the community is sooner enmeshed in succession crisis. The process of filling the vacant stool places enormous responsibilities on the gods and representatives of the five ruling houses. The process, of course, is undemocratic to the extent of its exclusion of the majority of the people, but what is actually more intriguing is the silence of the gods when consulted by the priest, Chief Koma. They decline to categorically name a successor, and when they appear to name one, the answer is foggy and stirs more confusion among the people. Although the gods throw back the responsibility of selection on the human community, their silence, in a way eloquently offers man the opportunity to exercise his democratic freedom of choice and register his participation in the leadership recruitment process. Unfortunately, the opportunity is neither realised as such nor properly utilised by the community.

Efforts by the representatives of the ruling houses who hold the suffrage as members of the council of elders further manifest confusion. They narrow the contest down to two affluent chiefs with royal blood – Togba and Aseburupo - who both head their ruling houses. While majority members of the elders council prefer Chief Togba on account of his wealth and generosity, Aseburupo also lays claim to the throne, reasoning that he is favoured by succession pattern and also his wealth and generosity. The choice of Togba merely deepens the quandary. His face appears on the divination board, suggesting that he is endorsed by the gods, but he does not have

the requisite paraphernalia of a chosen King on the board, i.e. the calabash of life in his beaded handle.

Chief Aseburupo feels cheated and aggrieved as a result of the decision of the Elders' Council to install Togba in spite of the misty message of the gods. The acrimony generated by this situation turns two friends into bitter enemies and what starts out as a jostling for the throne by the candidates sinks their immediate families, the whole of Ilu Oja and its environs deeper into confusion. The hatred between the families of Togba and Aseburupo recalls that between the families of Montague and Capulet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The marriage plan between Dide (Togba's son) and Kike (Aseburupo's daughter) is cancelled. Market women and farmers in solidarity with Aseburupo join the protest against perceived injustice done to him. Other women groups in neighbouring towns become involved to the extent that socio-economic activities are paralysed in an oblique reference to the general strike by workers in the oil sector and the organised labour in Nigeria between June and August 1994.⁷

The tension is further aggravated by Togba's sudden death after chewing a poison-coated *kolanut of life* (*Kolanut of life* is part of the rites of kingship which a new monarch must undergo). Ironically, in the case of Togba, "*kolanut of life*" turns into "kolanut of death". The unfathomable silence of the gods in the face of this tragedy and their refusal to decisively intervene in the matters of men engender more violence and social paralysis. Ilu Oja sooner erupts in turmoil. As a way forward,

Subu, Togba's widow is made the regent by the elders for three months, pending the choice of another king. Subu becomes ruthlessly vindictive in her brief stay in power. More than ever before, people's freedom of association, movement, expression and employment are violated on her orders with impunity. Traditional processes are discountenanced; citizens are whipped openly for sundry misdemeanor. Subu's whims becomes the constitution, the supreme law. Aseburupo too is accused of masterminding the death of Togba and his opposition to Subu's reign extracts much toll on the polity just as passionate hate pervades the atmosphere. "It is all so muddled up." (TSG, 53) says Kike.

However, the adversity of Subu's fascism and the obvious threat of social disintegration force the common people to eschew their primordial prejudices to press for urgent solution to their litany of woes. In a glib acknowledgement of the class element in Nigeria's political crises, the masses in the play recognise themselves as being manipulated by the elites, from Subu to Aseburupo, and even the Eunuchs who represent the military. Incidentally, the gods break their silence after the community observes seven days of prayer, fasting and vigil. The youngest virgin in the land is chosen as the new king to circumvent the previous hereditary, aristocratic and oligarchic nature of power contest. The divine choice is joyfully celebrated and it is accentuated in the epilogue with the cleansing rites of broom and songs. The broom apart from its cleansing essence is also used to remind the audience of the need to eschew identity differences and unite to achieve the goal of national development

through democratic governance. A bundle of broomsticks is a metaphor for strength in co-operation. As the saying goes, it is easier to bend and break a single broomstick than it is to bend and break a bundle of broomstick.

Apart from the symbol of the market earlier analysed, the choice of a virgin and the concluding rites of purgation are symbolic. The virgin symbolises a fresh beginning and by extension, a total break from the past. The post-Subu reign of terror will be a new era that is undefiled by the intrigues, rancour, manipulation and malevolence of the preceding era. As Yerima explains, the play was written in response to the socio-economic crises that characterise attempts by the military regime of General Sanni Abacha to sustain the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election.

People were being denied their positions, even after election, even after the gods had elected them. And the future of Nigeria was on the brink. That is why at the end, I bring in the virgin, the young virgin (Appendix D).

The cleansing rite (along with the choice of a virgin) is comparable to the “deus-ex-machina”- a theatrical device in ancient Greek drama employed in resolving conflicts through the intervention of a descending god. The god, lowered on the stage from “above” is to disentangle the web of conflicts since mankind is incapable of providing a solution. To negotiate the confusion and uncertainty of the period, Yerima appeals to this plausible element:

The scenario was so complicated for me to understand even as a playwright. May be like the Greek writers, I now said only the gods can resolve it. But that is why I end it with the spiritual cleansing – the broom part. I found out that was the only way Nigeria could go. We needed to cleanse and purge ourselves and hand it (Nigeria) over to God (Appendix D).

However, the solution proffered by Yerima in it is a tribute to confusion that is the dominant element in *The Silent Gods*. Though the cleansing and re-birth option is a logical possibility within the Yoruba cosmology where the play's political framework is sourced, from the way it is handled, it sounds facile and escapist. In the first instance, it fails to adequately address the root of ethnic distrust which it raises in the plot and which in reality threatens democratisation politics in Nigeria. Apart from this, the solution also fails to put in proper perspective, the class dimension to national politics, which the play raises toward the end.

The class dimension to the theory of political conflict is presented with the coming together of the masses in a bid to tackle the problems of existence; seeing themselves as victims of the states and weapons being manipulated by the privileged ruling class. The need for education, conscientisation and empowerment of the common people in the struggle for democracy is acknowledged. The act of coming together of different groups within the populace is a step toward self-reliance with a view to addressing problems arising from what Yerima elsewhere refers to as “democratic gamble” (2000, 6) of both civilian and military. In a way, it exemplifies the collapse of boundaries, merger of interests and elimination of primordial

differences, which are expected to be the hallmark of contemporary democratic politics.

However, the intervention of the gods as it were subverts the sub-text of unification and empowerment. The solution is again taken away from the hands of the majority of the people and back into the court of the gods. The gods' intervention is still within the framework of elitist democracy where the common people are peripheral to the decision making structure. It is not enough that the product of the choice process is a non-aristocrat (a virgin).

Considering its plot structure, *The Silent Gods* adopts the structure of a tragic-comedy, opening with a clearly harmonious order. When the light comes on to reveal a market place, people are buying and selling while dancing and singing accompany trading activities. As the director's note indicates:

(Lights come on to reveal a market place. People are buying and selling... the Narrator mingles. Three drummers come in and he joins them and begins to dance and sing... The traders join and soon the whole market is a lively place). (TSG, 11).

But the harmony thins out with the hesitation of the gods to intervene in Ilu Oja's succession politics. The inability of the human community to convert the gods' silence to an enhanced opportunity in democratic participation does not help the situation. With the sudden death of Togba, tyranny is let loose by Subu who succeeds her husband and is bent on avenging his death. The cloud of tragedy is however dispelled at the end with the restoration of harmony among the people, to pave the way for development through the purification rites.

The heteroformic character of the play's aesthetic is buttressed by the presence of satiric elements comparable with the topicality and relevance of Soyinka's interventionist agit prop sketches titled "Before the Blowout". Yerima was part of the University of Ife Theatre actors and actresses used for these sketches in the early eighties.

The Silent Gods show the Nigeria's democratisation as usually being ambushed by dictatorship. It excites laughter at the expense of politicians (represented by Aseburupo, Togba, Tobi and Subu). The audience is made to laugh at, yet, oppugn the politics of bitterness personified by Aseburupo when he loses out in the contest for throne. He illustrates the "winner takes all" and "all or nothing" principles of democratic praxis in Nigeria. The politics of vindictiveness, predation and hostage taking practiced by Subu is also ridiculed. These vices are depicted in the play as hindrances to good governance.

Both Aseburupo and Subu, greatly intolerant of opponents, contribute to the social dislocation in Ilu Oja. This is partly because in the community, leadership is closely associated with group identity. They determine the cause of action of their families in their quest for power. Aseburupo in cancelling the wedding between his daughter and the son of his rival declares:

Women listen and stop all this whimpering. How can I accept Chief Togba as king and as an in-law? The relationship won't work. We are both heads of our families. When we fight, the families fight too. When oil stains one finger, the whole hand is stained. (TSG, 25).

The frail logic of “guilty by association” is as laughable as it is contemptible, especially from a dignitary aspiring to the leadership of the community.

The enlistment of the support of eunuchs by Subu to ensure the installation of her son, Dide as king shows the tendency by some politicians to appeal to strength of force (using soldiers or thugs) to gain advantage over their opponents. Such arbitrary means of resolving political differences are the bane of Nigeria’s democratisation process. The question being raised by these portraits is that “how can we practise democracy without ‘democrats’?”

Narrative or story telling is a feature of style that identifies the play with others in the trade-epic category. It reinforces Yerima’s indebtedness to the indigenous theatrical methods of fusing the dramatic and the narrative. The playwright is however sensitive to the elements of parable theatre of Bertolt Brecht and the folk narrative, as in the dramaturgy of Femi Osofisan discussed in Chapter Four. These also include “distancing” methods like music, songs and dances, multiple narratives featuring love and politics. For instance, the love story between Dide and Kike is a sub-plot, which the narrator introduces. But it has impact on the dimension of politics in the main plot while contributing to our understanding of the political crisis in Ilu Oja. There is a link between the sub-text of marriage and the text of political conflict and democratic struggle. The couple, Dide and Kike represents the younger generation trying to eschew the bitterness of the older generation. Unfortunately, they are overwhelmed by the bitter politicking of their parents as their

marriage is truncated at the instance of Aseburupo and Subu. The fact that the love could not be consummated shows that the pursuit of happiness through association also stands endangered where democracy is lacking.

Apart from this, the Narrator through the sub-plot raises the issue of class solidarity especially among members of the ruling class (in a way that is to make compelling similar class solidarity among the common folk). The Narrator sensitises his audience:

... Tell me friends, why do the rich and mighty always
stick together? The son and daughter of the two men,
Chief Togba and Chief Aseburupo are soon to be married.
(TSG, 13)

To make the play realistic and credible, Yerima draws characters from across the social strata; from the aristocrats like Aseburupo and Subu, to the down trodden like Dago and Batu; from lovers like Dide and Kike to priests like Koma and his boys. Characters also represent the diffusion that typifies Nigeria as a multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual society. While some characters represent features of modern society, some are drawn from traditional culture and political institutions.

The Narrator for example provides the audience a recast of past events and insight into approaching ones. He atimes offer interpretation of political events apart from providing vital links in the main plot and the sub-plot through his narration. He weaves in and out of the action on stage in a manner that blends the dramatic and the narrative in the aesthetics of the play. He is the traditional historian who embodies knowledge about culture, flora and fauna of the people. The playwright from the on

set diverts attention towards him through the use of spotlight, which picks him out from the dark stage in order to attest his importance. Having attracted the audience's attention with his eloquence, the Narrator introduces the thematic pre-occupation of the play – unity as a means of achieving national rebirth, reconciliation and democratic development. The author uses him to achieve the resolution of conflict through the deus-ex-machine-like method. In one breath, his role is comparable to the modern day Master of Ceremony. In another sense, he reminds us of the original source of contemporary African theatre in traditional lore, song, music and dance.

Close to the Narrator in terms of cultural filiations is the priest, Chief Koma. He is a diviner (Babalawo) who by his calling is the link between the human world and the realm of divinities. Like the story-teller, he embodies ancient wisdom and knowledge of the present. But more than the story-teller, he is capable of prognostication due to his association with the gods. Meanwhile, a materialist dimension is subtly inscribed into his character by the playwright. The failure of the gods to intervene in the matters of men initially tends to re-position man at the centre of decision-making. Consequently, the divinities who have always decided the right candidate for the crown are “de-centred”. According to Chief Koma:

I cast the shell across the divination board only to be told
that the choice of our New King has to be made by us?...
The gods refused to choose the King. Seven times did
I ask them, and seven times did they answer, too. (TSG, 13).

In an open preference for free will, Man is required by the gods to choose, but the priest too loses his super human essence in the process. Equally compromised is the omniscient ascription of the gods. The priest is as ignorant of the future and bereft of solution to the political problems of succession just as any other citizen of Ilu-Oja. Therefore, the contraction of the gap between Chief Koma and the ordinary men in terms of prescience demystifies Koma and the gods. It also spells doom for the whole town as the situation of silence is twisted to suit diverse interests. For instance, the silence in the face of Togba's murder leaves the people (especially Subu) to engage in suspicion, blind accusation and mis-directed anger. It also leads to the removal of Koma as Chief Priest, his banishment to the forest and the arbitrary installation of his brother in his place. This de-sacralisation or distortion of the traditional processes by the regent precipitates greater chaos:

CHIEF KOMA ... The village has known unhappiness since King Togba died a mysterious death. The villagers are beginning to mock the gods, and the children pelt my junior priests with stones. (TSG, 55).

However, the materialist re-invention of the gods is not sustained till the end. The gods step in once again and impose a solution – a virgin. But the unpleasant thing about the manner of resolution is that the range of choice extends beyond the present oligarchy that constitutes the ruling class and the Electoral College. It implies that elders from the five ruling houses – Togba, Tobi, Diga, Aseburupo and Koma are no longer the only people qualified to assume power.

The five elders represent different ruling houses, which arguably represents political parties, or ethno-geographical divisions that constitute the basis of representation in Nigeria's civil rule. However, Chiefs Togba and Aseburupo manifest the bitter rivalry that often mark and mar power contest. Even the stage formation is used by Yerima to buttress or establish this sharp antagonism. The meeting of Elders summoned to choose a successor to the late king provides the context:

(The scene opens in a meeting of elders. Chiefs Togba and Aseburupo sit at the opposite sides of the meeting of five elders (TSG, 13).

Shortly after, both of them are hotly contesting for the throne. Though they both have something admirable about them, the fact that neither of them could reign successfully shows that there is something fundamentally wrong with the aristocratic order, which they represent. The system opens competition to only "the richest and most loved man chosen by the gods" (TSG, 12). It is a government of the "rich and mighty". The message encapsulated in this reality is that the solution to the crises of democratisation should be sought outside the range of choices and options available during the period, that is, beyond the crop of politicians and soldiers who usurp power. Since democracy is inclusive, expanding the scope of choice beyond the ruling house is one affirmative step toward that direction, even though the gods are directing the choice.

The use of wealth to court electorates' favour is a familiar feature of Nigeria's failed democratic experiment. Togba and Aseburupo "throw coins" at the

crowd apparently to win people's affection. He makes it clear that the generosity of the two contenders is not an altruistic act but a patron-client transaction, which makes their wealth an investment. The two chiefs are presented as being qualified for the throne but are still lacking one element or the other. For Aseburupo, it is the temperament required in a leader. He is shown as an epitome of "politics with bitterness" But one redeeming feature about Aseburupo, which Yerima emphasises, is that in spite of pressure on him by the elders of his family to form a separate town called Aseburupolu where he will reign as king, he declares:

CHIEF ASEBURUPO: Tell the family that we need to stand together at this critical hour. But I do not want blood to be shed on account of my person. Neither do I want to break up the village. We were born together. We grew up together. It is right that I rule the land as one. I want to be king of Ilu Oja not Aseburupolu (TSG, 36).

Through this "patriotic and nationalistic" aspect of Aseburupo's character, Yerima contends that the solution to the crises of democratic governance manifest in identity differences does not lie in secession. Constant tinkering with and shifting of borders has not solved Nigeria's political conflicts. Indeed, to quote Horowitz again, "the answer to the problem of democracy and ethnic conflict is not to re-draw the map of the world" (682). Yerima similarly agrees, through Aseburupo's position, that political separation fosters enmity rather than heal it.

The character of Aseburupo illustrates how political rivalry breeds mistrust and how intolerance can threaten political stability. Because of the earlier rivalry

between Aseburupo and Togba, the former is accused of complicity in his death. This is driven, though wrongly, into the people's consciousness by the state under Subu. It takes the revelation by Chief Koma to clear his name. The priest reveals that Togba is murdered by the Eunuchs who feel threatened and marginalised by his reign.

Subu personifies the autocratic tendencies of military regimes, including arbitrariness, coercion and lack of respect for due process. Notwithstanding the customary provision, she wants her son to ascend the throne after his father, and she seeks the support of the Head Eunuch – the symbol of the coercive and protective instrument of the state. The support is to be rewarded with Kike, Aseruburupo's daughter who is hitherto engaged to marry Dide her son. The arbitrary step is to punish an 'enemy' rather than to reward a faithful servant. More importantly, it depicts the tendency to distribute reward and punishment under a dictatorial regime (like Subu's) in accordance with personal whims of the leader(s) and not necessarily in accordance with a collectively defined procedure.

Under Subu's brief regency, royal daughters are flogged during the period of cleaning ritual when no one is supposed to be beaten in the land. Her contempt for tradition, which parallels a dictator's disregard for constitutional provision, is highlighted in her response to Chief Koma:

SUBU: A child that does not show that she has been properly
brought up will be flogged, ritual or no ritual.
(TSG, 50).

In her unwillingness to surrender to democratic institutional restraints like custom, she cut the figure of a military dictator. Chief Koma aptly defines her tenure as basically undemocratic when he remarks:

... Things have become too difficult the village is tense.
Under your yoke of power, fear has gripped the land,
I beg you to go gently on your people. (TSG, 50).

She justifies her ruthlessness in the familiar military parlance that “the people need iron hands to put them straight”, and that “they need to be disciplined” (TSG, 50). She carries her whims to a ridiculous extent when she indicts the gods too for their silence on the identity of her husband’s suspected killers. Like a dictator, she believes that all institutions, including religion can be bent or twisted to serve her purpose, hence, the decision to sack the priest and install a new one. In her words:

The gods waste time, so I have decided to do their jobs
for them... Unless your gods speak you are useless to me...
Your gods are asleep, old man. They spent their time
saying nothing. I am a functional Regent, I need functional gods.
(TSG, 51).

Yerima here creates a repulsive picture of dictatorship to the extent that the system is unworthy of further perpetuation.

The image of the ordinary people or the masses as a collective in the play deserves some remarks, even if in passing. Admittedly, unlike in a democracy, power in *Ilu Oja* does not lie with the masses of the people. The masses are observers in the processes of governance. Their coming together at the end to resolve the political

impasse, therefore, is a positive action. Their grievances presented by Dago is that they are tired of anarchy bred by the subsisting dictatorship under Subu. They also complain about the regime's corruption, its arbitrariness and injustice. The sharp movement of the masses from passivity to activism is to jolt the consciousness of the people within and outside the theatre. The play is urging the people to take concrete action, struggle in unity and combat autocracy that is fictionally personified in Subu.

On the other hand, the masses (as a collective) are presented as being fickle minded because their opinions are easily swayed. The most enduring thing about them is their acknowledgement of the transience of human situation. Hence, the crowd that holds Aseburupo in high esteem at the beginning (judging from how the people swarm around him at the market) swiftly turns to demand his death, over an unfounded allegation that he is involved in Togba's death. Though a clear evidence of ignorance, the seriousness with which the opinion is arrived at and conveyed as if it is the truth shows the slender capacity of the crowd for rigorous logical reasoning and consistency (TSG, 58-59). It is this brittle capacity for reasoning on the part of the common people that elites explore in order to manipulate existing cleavages for sectarian interests.

Through the dance patterns, music, songs and costume, Yerima appeals to multi-ethnic nature of the Nigerian society. For instance in the premiere of the play in Lagos, the costumes used were taken from the diverse cultures of Nigeria. On parade were also songs and dances of Ibibio, Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Efik, Tiv and Urhobo,

among other ethnic groups, to represent the people of Ilu Oja during the opening market scene. However, The idea of richness in diversity created through these theatrical devices stand subverted by the upheaval that greets the succession tussle. Meanwhile, the elements have contributed to the projection in Ilu-Oja, of a heterogeneous society that is trying to mediate its diversity through the restoration of free speech and collective action.

Beyond the above theatrical means, the language of the play is characterised by simplicity in the fashion of mobilisational and conscientising trado-epic plays. Though written in English, the diction is given much local flavour, quite close in texture to Yoruba language and culture, which provides the framework for the play's discourse. The use of proverbs, idioms, and epigrams among other rhetorical resources of Yoruba language makes the adopted English more accessible to the audience. Yerima through the play's language also tries to address the challenge of communicative efficacy posed by a foreign language in a multi-ethnic society with a high percentage of illiteracy. In trying to defend this option, he opines that the best way drama can effectively communicate to the people is through the clarity of the intention and message of the dramatist and the exploration of indigenous linguistic resources like proverbs and idioms:

The beauty of Nigerian languages, I found out, is that each one has its own pattern. It has its own images and symbols. And what I love doing is using proverbs and I want to use proverbs in such a way that they make sense within that context... most of the images in the languages are interwoven and I hope that I use that to break the language barrier (Appendix D).

Whereas some playwrights like Oloruntoba-Oju and Tunde Fatunde use pidgin to achieve the same accessibility, Yerima finds pidgin deficient. The English language used shows influence of the cultural background that provides the motivation for the play's discourse, but it is concluded in a way that audience from outside that ethnic background can relate to the play.

One aspect of the rhetorical foundation of *The Silent Gods* in indigenous culture is the writer's use of Ifa divination chants. Ifa divination is a means of resolving problems of existence in Yoruba culture. The diviner illuminates the clients' problems through the corpus of Ifa that appears on the divination board (Opon Ifa) and the chants of the corpus by the priest. The problem, whatever its nature, usually has a precedent within the vast scope of Ifa epistemology. The diviner uses this as a guide for understanding and recommending solution to the client's predicament. This means of conflict resolution is brought to bear on the conflict in *The Silent Gods*. For example, the first divination of Chief Koma:

Ahere Oko abidi jere jere
 Agbalagba ejo ti fi dobable ara re wo
 Adifa fun Babalawo mesan
 Olumoran mefa nijo nwon njija agba l'otu Ife.

(The hamlet with a fortified base
 The old snake which suffered degradation by prostrating
 We cast Ifa for nine priests
 And six learneds
 The day they were at loggerheads over supremacy in Ife)
 (TSG, 19).

The chant above is from Eji Ogbe⁸. The Odu establishes the resolution of supremacy contest between the sixteen principal Odu Ifa⁹ in favour of the youngest. Contrary to the expectation of others, Ofun, the youngest who was much discriminated against was chosen by Olodumare (Almighty) as the leader of all the Odu. The Odu is relevant to the context of the play because it touches on the leadership crises threatening to break Ilu Oja (Nigeria) apart. Besides, it foregrounds the option adopted at the end in resolving the crises – the youngest virgin, who is hardly in contention is to wear the crown like Ofun in Ejiogbe.

Similar aptness can be found in another chant later in the play:

E ba lo-lo-lo-loo-bi olo
 E ba re re-re bi ere
 Ibi e ti lo le fabo so ---

(I wish to journey the vast dome of the earth,
 like the grinding stone
 Or the jungles like the serpent.
 Where you begin, there you shall return...) (TSG, 58)

This excerpt from Oyeku meji illustrates the stagnation that afflicts the community as a result of the leadership crisis. All solutions hitherto tried proved abortive, hence, the situation of “much motion without movement”. Although the sense of lack of progress painted in the Yoruba original version of the chant through repetition and pun is lost in the English translation, it is still discernible in the epigram “where you begin, there you shall return”. Thus, the appeal to the poetic chants of Ifa among other communicative elements is used to formulate yet another theatrical

response to the problems associated with democratisation in the face of military rule in Nigeria.

This chapter has examined the heteroformic theatrical discourse in the articulation of the travails of democracy in Nigeria. Irobi and Yerima in *Nwokedi* and *The Silent Gods* respectively use cleansing rites as a trope to break with authoritarian rule. They also affirm the importance of youths in the struggle for democracy, being the alternative to the so-called “wasted” generation.

While the heteroformic aesthetics manifests in the tragic impulse of *Nwokedi*, it features in the tragic-comic milieu of *The Silent Gods*. But the essence of the plays’ overall aesthetics is not much in their fidelity to the compositional principles of these models, but in their coalescence of these and other artistic devices, from Western and indigenous African theatre. They also adopt polemical strategies of other models earlier examined, all in a bid to formulate “appropriate” responses and “plausible” solutions to the nagging problems of democratisation in modern Nigeria.

NOTES

1. For a clearer insight into the artistic, religious and political import of Ekpe festival, See J.N. Amankulor "Ekpe Festival as Religious Ritual and Dance Drama", in Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed) *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A critical Source Book*, 113-129.
2. The generational political theory in the play recalls what the Babangida regime championed in its Transition To Civil Rule Programme. By April 1987 when *Nwokedi* was first performed, the regime had just launched its phased Transition to Civil Rule Programme, which was to terminate in 1990. One feature of the programme is the banning of a category of politicians who had held offices in the First and Second Republics from participation. The aim was to avoid the pitfalls of the past republics and pave way for active participation of youths, then tagged "Newbreed".
3. Esiaba Irobi. *Nwokedi: A Play*. Enugu: ABIC Pub, 1991.
All quotations are taken from this edition and are appropriately cited in the chapter after the abbreviation NWK.
4. Under the Green Revolution programme of the Federal Government at the period, eleven River Basin Authorities were established throughout Nigeria. The purpose of the River Basin was to assist farmers in enhancing the quality of their products. Sokoto-Rima-Hadejia River Basin Authority was one of the projects. In a bid to develop it through an Italian construction company, Impresit Bakalori, the Federal Government acquired land and displaced hundreds of peasant farmers and fishermen, allegedly without compensation or alternative provisions. The peasants protested and the government reacted by summoning the police to maintain law and order. In the ensuing clash, farmers and fishermen whose number could not be ascertained lost their

lives. Hence, the Bakalori Massacre of 1982 is an example of popular revolt in Nigerian history.

5. Osborne's play depicts the frustration and disillusionment of British youths especially with the high rate of unemployment after the Second World War.
6. Yerima's fondness for history as a material for contemporary drama is evident in other plays like *The Trial of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Kaffir's Last Game*, *Attahiru*, *Erelu* and *Tafida* (forthcoming).
7. The strike was on when the play was premiered in Lagos between 22 and 27th July 1994. It was called to protest the cancellation of the results of the June 12, 1993 presidential election and the detention without trial of Chief Moshood Abiola, the presumed winner of the election. The workers demanded immediate termination of military rule.
8. I am grateful to Mr. Bayo Ogundijo of the Institute of Cultural Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife for this information.
9. The Sixteen-Odu Ifa are: Obara meji, Okanran meji, Ogunda meji, Osa meji, Ejiogbe Oyeku meji, Iwori meji, Odi meji, Irosun meji, Owonri meji, Ika meji, Oturupon meji, Otura meji, Irete meji, Ose meji and Ofun meji.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The thesis has so far examined different dramatic forms inspired by the context of democratisation in Nigeria. However, its specific concern has been limited to literary drama produced between the last two decades of the twentieth century, that is, from 1980 to 2000. Undoubtedly, the changing tide of popular opinion across the world in favour of democratisation and the concomitant anathematisation of all kinds of authoritarian rule influence the works of modern Nigerian dramatists. The study adduces various reasons for the upsurge of interest in democracy and democratisation. It considers external pressures ranging from the so-called “withering” of the Soviet states and the collapse of Communism to the demands of multi-national agencies like World Bank, International Monetary Fund and so on. It also considers internal factors like decaying infrastructure, increasing violence, crime, unemployment and corruption, all combining to explode the messianic mission of the military in government.

In responding to this reality, Nigerian dramatists through various artistic frameworks share the developmental aspiration of democracy. Sometimes, they respond by creating or implicating a counter-society wherein the ethos of military dictatorship are negated, and those of democracy idealised. Their technical innovation

and re-composition in that regard broaden the frontiers of existing genres. Attention is paid to fresh generic possibilities resulting from the process of new combinations. Textual analyses of eight selected plays focus on the literary forms and techniques adopted in each play as a text and as part of a literary category.

The genre approach used in the thesis is an appropriate critical method for the investigation of a concept like democratisation. It accommodates the diversity and complexity of literary experience. It forges harmony between the text and performance and it is necessitated by its keen sensitivity to the social obligation of drama as well as its performance mechanism.

The devaluative construct for instance, provokes contemptuous laughter against the subversion of democratic principles. This is demonstrated in Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* and Soyinka's *From Zia With Love*. Both of them create a repulsive picture of civilian and military rulers and shock the audience into recognising how far the existing system of governance is distanced from the ideals of democracy. Thus, Awero is united with Hyacinth through the ridicule that they both inspire. Though critics perceive this option as being limited by its stopping short of prescribing a solution, it is possible to say that the repellent picture of authoritarianism painted in each play is sufficient to awake in the audience a desire for a better order.

However, the limitation is somewhat taken care of in the trado-epic aesthetics. This is founded on alternative theatrical and political tradition of popular participation. It explores the dialectical materialist and alienating codes of Brecht's epic drawn in

conjunction with the communal participatory aesthetics of pre-colonial African performances. The examined plays pursue the notion of democratisation as a mean of empowering majority of the people, both politically and economically. They advocate or create an alternative society attained through revolutionary struggle by the oppressed masses (Olorunfoba-Oju's *Awaiting Trouble*) or through unyielding agitation for reformation (Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*.)

Trado-epic aesthetic re-invents the power centre in a way that is favourable to the participation of the common people who constitute the majority in any society. The two plays were premiered in the early 1990s, when military dictatorship or one party civilian rule suffered low estimation. So, the democratisation process is closely linked with the process of demilitarisation of the polity through dramatic conventions of participatory theatre.

In addition, the politicisation of sexuality in gynocentric aesthetics is examined. The option creates a male dominated world that it questions, contradicts and subverts. As the action progresses, it re-orders power and authority with a view to establishing the role and importance of women in democratisation. The playwrights who subscribe to this poetics contend that equal participation of male and female is a necessary condition for the success of democracy. As such, they create conflicts and situations that upturn male-dominated power structure and through affirmative action, expand opportunities for women's participation in governance. Our analyses of Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* and Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*

illustrate this form. *The Reign of Wazobia* demonstrates the response of a female dramatist to the authoritarianism of the status quo at the time of production, while *The Wives' Revolt* captures the positively changing perspectives about women in the works of Nigerian male dramatists. While *The Reign* depicts pro-female inverted sexism, *The Wives' Revolt* advocates gender complementarity. It has been argued in the thesis that the accommodationist and consensual polemics of the latter is more attuned to the concept of democracy.

The last artistic mode is the heteroformic construct. It celebrates creative freedom and genre "boundlessness". It is consciously eclectic in its fusion of elements of the previous categories with others beyond that range. The argument here is that democratic rule failed in the First, Second and Third Republics as a result of the greed, corruption and selfishness of old politicians who accentuate cleavages within the polity. It should be remarked that the current civilian rule often tagged the Fourth Republic under the presidency of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo still harbours these vices. Therefore, a new democratic process requires a resolute break with the old order. Both Irobi's *Nwokedi* and Yerima's *The Silent Gods* dramatise a "break with the past" in their engagement with the Second and Third attempts at democracy respectively. They use the symbolism of purification rituals in African culture to achieve that sense of "break" with the anarchic past. But the rhetorical strategies of devaluative, trado-epic and gynocentric are also employed. In *Nwokedi*, the exclusion of anti-democratic politicians like Arikpo and Senator Nwokedi from participation in

politics of anti-democratic politicians like Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr. becomes mandatory. Both politicians are turned into scape-goats, saddled with the evils of the entire society. This is reminiscent of what happens in cleansing rituals and festivals in traditional African societies.

Osisoma (*Nwokedi*) and Ilu Oja (*The Silent Gods*) are symbolic representations of Nigeria. In their moments of catharsis, the two societies are better placed to start anew towards democratic governance. Although Irobi argues for a combination of autocratic streak with civilian temper rather than liberal democracy, one is of the opinion that this should rather be a temporary solution, as the society can only move forward under a truly democratic atmosphere. Irobi's recommendation of benevolent dictatorship is only a short leap away from tyranny and fascism.

The thesis pays attention to common tools of the theatre like costume, scenery, lighting, song, dance, music and décor, apart from the peculiar polemical elements and defining features of each category. It shows that innovations and experimentations are common to these plays. For example, the conventional Act/Scene divisions have given way to choices like "Movement" (*The Reign of Wazobia*). "Phase" (*Awaiting Trouble*), "Cycle" (*Nwokedi*), "Part" (*Aringindin and the Night Watchmen*). Some are just constructed as one-act plays. *From Zia with Love*, *Midnight Hotel* and *The Silent Gods* are examples.

Though the focus of the thesis is restricted to literary drama, one is quite aware that other dramatic media like agit prop sketches, Theatre for Development,

Community Theatre and Home-Video have been used to address pressing issues of democracy and development in contemporary Nigeria. The articulations of the democratic fervour in these media deserve a separate study. It is contended that in view of the immense capacity of drama to promptly respond to social temper, the most defining challenges before Nigerian theatre in the post-military dispensation in the 21st century are State reconstruction and national re-birth. These involve getting rid of dictatorship and entrenching ethos of democracy. The task would require the expansion of democratic space and institutions to allow for greater participation. It also involves infrastructural revitalisation to achieve economic empowerment of the people and eradication of poverty, disease and illiteracy from the society. Besides, reconciliation along ethnic, religious, and political lines becomes imperative. Literary drama and other theatrical expressions ought to be part of efforts to meet these challenges by constantly reflecting values of democracy. Through its mediatory and conscientising schema, drama should sensitise the government to the perennial problems of under-development.

It is gratifying to note that a new civilian administration had been inaugurated since May 29, 1999. However, the consensus among critics is that indices of under-development traceable to prolonged military rule still persist. What obtains now is not democracy par excellence. Rather, it still has much room for improvement. Modern Nigerian drama can and should contribute to this improvement, by propagating the values of civil liberty, popular sovereignty and constitutionalism.

It is unfortunate however, that the rich messages encoded in the studied plays are not accessible to majority of Nigerians. One of the reasons is the fact that play-reading and theatre-going as habits have suffered decline in Nigeria in recent times. What with the boom in Home Video and Film industry! Another reason is that these plays in focus are written in English language which, according to widely quoted UNESCO figures, is accessible to only Thirty Percent (30%) of the total population of Nigeria. The reception of the plays by the masses have not been as remarkable as say, for instance, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's experiment with the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre in Kenya. Here, Ngugi collaborated with thousands of rural people to stage in local language (Kikuyu), "*Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I will marry when I want) and later, *Maitu Njugira* (Mother, Sing for Me).

Nigerian literary drama has not recorded a significant impact on the audience comparable to Hubert Ogunde's *Yoruba Romu* that was performed in 1964 in Western Region. The undeniable popularity of Ngugi and Ogunde's plays, perhaps, accounted for their ban by the authorities in Kenya and Nigeria respectively. The Kamiriithu experiment of Ngugi and the political intervention of Ogunde in Western Nigeria were articulated in indigenous languages accessible to their immediate audience. It becomes easy to mobilise the people around viewpoints projected in these plays.

In view of the importance of the relationship between text, performance and the audience in appropriating the dialogic experience in drama; considering the potentials of drama in promoting political consciousness toward greater participation

in public affairs, literacy programmes in the country should be re-assessed toward their improvement. Literacy in English language and the indigenous languages should be made available to the entire populace. This will facilitate a wider access of the people to the plays either in their English original or in their indigenous language translations. Awareness of values and ideas articulated in the works will certainly contribute to the cultivation of an enduring democratic political culture.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that changes in social realm mould the text, just as they also influence the context, composition pattern and audience reception of literary productions. In the specific case of drama, it is a responsive and dialogic space within which the writer tries to mediate the chaos of existence. Form is a key element of this mediation and it deserves closer attention in a scholarly investigation. As Juliet Mitchell asserts, "literary forms arise as one of the ways in which changing subjects create themselves as subject within a new social context" (427). A close attention to forms, conventions and structure of drama yields greater understanding of such a work. This is because they are useful means of generating insights into the intricacies and complexities of socio-political engagement of literature. The analytic framework for modern Nigerian drama should, therefore, be such that will properly apprehend and accord necessary import to the formal elements and compositional techniques in the quest for meaning, and in the investigation of political engagement of a text.

The essence of a work of art lies in its compositional techniques because the latter shape and systematise the raw materials of existence into a coherent whole in form of “text” or “performance”. That is why the thesis focuses in its analyses, the beauty that results from a harmonious relationship between the literary constituents, forged by form and techniques in its discourse of democratisation in modern Nigerian drama. It is possible to use the analysed texts and the theatrical forms employed to understand Nigeria’s political undercurrents in the 80s and 90s. The identified theatrical models can also serve as vista of the aesthetics of Nigerian drama in the twenty-first Century.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview with **Prof. Femi Osofisan** (9th December, 1999).

Question: It is observable that in recent times, there has been an upsurge in the activities of Nigerian writers. More works – poems, plays, and novels –are being written. Do you see equal increase in critical responses to these works?

Answer: I don't see as upsurge as such in creative writing generally. I think there is a lot of poetry being written, but I am not quite sure whether the same thing applies to drama or to the novel. The novel in particular is being sadly neglected. But you can understand why. It takes more pain to write a novel. These days when people are now self-publishing, you can imagine how much more it will take to self-publish. So poetry is the one would say is common, because it is relatively easier to write –many of these people think so. Whatever they can put together in verse is already poetry. That seems to be the case. But I would not say there is any kind of upsurge as such. And I would put the level of criticism at par with the other things like drama and the novel. I think the same lack is observable in the area of criticism.

Question: In the decades of eighties and early nineties , a good number of plays that were written had Leftist /Marxist ideological undertone, from your own plays to those of Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso, Olu Obafemi, Tunde Fatunde etc. One wonders if similar ideological commitment is manifest in plays being written currently.

Answer: You *really* can't expect that now. A number of things have changed. The fall of the Soviet Union particularly at the end of the Cold War, the triumph of Western capitalism of the US, the dominance of information technology by the US which is the major aspect of ideological manipulation. All these things have changed the climate of opinion and then when you add to that the Babangida years, and the Abacha years, a lot of things have changed in our society, especially in the Babangida years when there was the culture of "settlement". A lot of people were just bought over- people who would have been role models and things like that. That to a very large extent helped to undermine the leftist stable. So all these experience were a combination of historical events outside the country, within the country. Also many of the national liberation movements all over Africa have got their independence. The tempo of ideological agitation on the continent went down considerably because of all these various factors. The liberation movements got into power and became just as problematic as the regimes of other countries. The same political insecurity, economic instability, coup d'etat became rampant. So, obviously, that affected the generation of writers that came after us. It is not just here, it is all over the world. In discourse, there

is a kind of “New Right” that we are now hearing about. This became dominant. It is what I will call an almost “amoral” ideology. Everything is just measured in terms of economics-how much money you can make, how much you can rip-off other people – triumphant capitalism as it is. A generation that is brought up on that is a different generation and their obvious concerns are different. If you come particularly to the theatre, dramatists who grew up in that generation were very much concerned with self-promotion, self – selling. Art became a commodity rather than an ideological weapon. You will see that even popular theatres declined and they (practitioners) went to video. All the popular travelling theatres became video groups. Nobody was interested anymore in using this theatre for politics. “This is what will sell and make huge money. You are on your own. The state is not going to come to your help. It is an individual effort.” The same thing in literature. People tried to write what will sell and so people turned their back on literature if it won’t sell. That is the climate in which we are now at the moment. Those who publish are either publishing to mould their own egos primarily. They are not really interested in changing any society or affecting anything. They want to put their names in print or they want to make money.

Question: Personally, how much has this climate affected your own writing too?

Answer: Inevitably, one is caught in it. The New World Order that is being promoted has not quite stabilised. We are in a kind of transition. But one thing that is obvious is that since the goal that one was trying to promote was not really in terms of vocabulary or terminology, you can call it by any name, you don’t have to say Marxism and all that. Obviously, all that vocabulary had to change because things have changed. But the ideals are still there. A just society. Whether we like it or not, we are still a society in crises, and we’ve got to deal with these crises. There is injustice. There is hunger on the streets. You don’t have to call yourself a Marxist or anything to see that there is hunger on the streets, that there is squalor, people cannot make ends meet, there is a lot of instability out there because graduates cannot get jobs. There is unemployment. Whether you like it or not, these are still problems. You don’t have to call them by any particular term. One is still committed to these things and trying to make people see them the way they are.

Now of course, there has been an advance. The military has been removed. At least, that is one step forward because the military was very much the obstacle to any kind of social order that is progressive. Now consolidating that will be the next step we are faced with and you can see what is happening with the rash of ethnic violence, religious intolerance etc. the retrogressive forces will not just give in like that, they will fight back. One is convinced that you will have to try and promote some kind of vigilance. Personally, I am more convinced that these problems can only be solved in a more global scale, on a Pan-African scale rather than through a nationalist or individual struggle. You will see that I am moving to more and more global perspective of things. I am also concerned of course with looking at the past, looking

at some of the black people who could serve as models, trying to resuscitate them in the memory of our people.

Question: Like your play – *Nkrumah Ni Africa Ni?*

Answer: Yes. I hope to write a trilogy. The first one is on Nkrumah. The next one will be on Amilcar Cabral. The third one will be on the former UN Secretary-General

Question: Will there be a shift in your theatrical style and techniques in response to these current concerns?

Answer: I don't know of any shift as such. I try to use whatever style I consider the best for the moment. I am still interested in experimenting; to see what will work best in any particular circumstance.

Question: What determines that best?

Answer: You won't know until you get to the stage, that's when you know what will work or not. It is not something that you can determine in advance. If it is a major story, obviously, it is going to take a number of hours to perform, and you may make it a two-character thing. So it always depends. I think each story behind the play will determine or decide its own form.

Question: I read your article in *Research in African Literatures RAL* on "Negritude And the Rites of Post-colonial Remembering" The question is that in the past, especially in the eighties, the Marxist critical approach to creative works was dominant. But in contemporary times there are several critical paradigms competing for attention, from Feminism to Post-Structuralism, to deconstruction. What will you recommend as the appropriate critical response to modern Nigerian theatre?

Answer: I won't say one is appropriate and one is not appropriate. All of them are appropriate, depending on what you want to say. It is just that as far as criticism is concerned, you have to take into consideration the market. Criticism is a market thing. In the formal category, people do it in order to earn a living, in order to get promotion, to get established in the academy etc. it is not an objective thing. Criticism belongs to the market and whatever is selling in that market becomes the maximum value at that time. The market as we know it is basically an American one. This is where criticism sells most at the moment. It means that the American market dictates for the rest of us what to do. And what are the dominant trends in America now? As far as scholarship is concerned, we are just on the margin. What sells there now is deconstruction or post-colonial criticism. It means that if you write anything now and it doesn't concern

Foucault and all the rest, you will not get published. In the past, America was hostile to Marxist ideology and once Marxism fell, which publisher will be very interested in it anymore? They were funding it when it was a fight. They needed to know the ideology well, to keep it in check. In fact, CIA funded many of the leftist journals in Europe so that they could keep a tab on all that was going on and know who was there and not here. Once Marxism fell the market changed. Deconstruction became predominant and the whole market is rowdy. We all scramble for books on this 'new' thing. As a kind of quixotic, somewhat pathetic reaction to that, you then have other things like feminism by people who still insisted on putting some ethical values on literature. Because Deconstruction came and said 'no', there is no value in literature, some people still insisted on this. One of the ways in which they could link it was Feminism. The rise of the female in recent years was also part of the whole American thing. People from the periphery, at least who have their origin in the margin, finally brought what you call post-colonial criticism because this was the only way now to draw and maintain some kind of attention on the people at the margin, otherwise, they were going to forget them. So, we are still not free. Colonialism is still much here. It is in the post-colonial criticism that we try to make a space for ourselves, to insist that we are still part of the world which merit to be discussed. Through post-colonial criticism, people are able to do other things too, at least to bring in the question of value, the question of economics of these places, the relationship with multi-national corporations. If you want to get published you must find yourself a niche in that whole discourse.

Question: How healthy is that for African literary scholarship?

Answer: It can either be healthy or it can be unhealthy. It is a tool. What you then use it

for is a different thing. I think Anthony Appiah has an essay on this. "Is the 'post' in Post colonialism the same as the 'post' in Post modernism?" What you use it for is a question that is left to you, but if you want to be relevant, to maintain some articulation, if you want to be heard ... it is just like using English. Is that healthy or unhealthy? Why are we using English at all? If you want to reach an international market at all, you know the advantage of using English. But if you want to talk to yourself, then you don't have to use English. You maintain your own monologue. It is a question of seizing what is there and trying to use it for what you choose. It depends on you totally. But if you seize those tools, appropriate them and try to use them. That is what I was trying to say in the article you have just mentioned. As a matter of fact, there is just one margin and one centre. The blacks in the diaspora assume that they are speaking for the rest of us, just because we are blacks. But infact, their concerns when you read them are not the concern of anybody here at all. They are worried about how the white man is looking down on us. That is not our primary problem here. We want know how NEPA will work, how food will get on the table.

how you will go to school, how you will go to work without being attacked by armed robbers etc. Also, we are concerned about the kind of government we get. The government is black. All the evil people in government are black and things are just bad. So, we are concerned with that.

Question: I want you to comment on new generation of Nigerian dramatists. I.e. the generation after yours.

Answer: They are not many. Who are you talking about?

Question: Yerima, Olorunfoba-Oju, Onwueme, etc.

Answer : Okay. We have Pedro Obaseki, Stella Oyedepo, the Lafomania group and so on. The thing is that they are still growing. They will find their feet. I think there is a certain lack of focus at the moment . You can't really say what the focus is. And somebody like Yerima has planted himself squarely within the establishment. I can see him becoming a poet laureate one day- the establishment man who is writing the kind of things that members of the establishment will want to see. He has a lot of talent. We shall see how that may work out; whether he himself will be caught within the contradictions of that sooner or later, or not. I don't know how you can be an establishment playwright with a conscience. He is there now and already writing these panegyrics. But we have Pedro Obaseki also who is doing some interesting things. I have not talked to him but I am afraid that he may get himself caught too within the market syndrome. He is becoming a popular writer for the video market and there is a danger in that. The pressures on their own generation will dictate where they will go. We can only watch.

Question: What will you say about this later generation of dramatists in terms of their style and approach to the theatre?

Answer: It is difficult to say in the sense that they are lucky, aren't they? They are coming after us. So, they have got our example there. Some of them are following that and have actually acknowledged it. I am happy at least to hear somebody like Pedro Obaseki openly acknowledging whatever one may have tried to do for him. Onukaba Adinoyi Ojo is doing a lot of writing too. But we shall see. As I said earlier, some of them have got sucked up in the establishment and that may be a good thing. This is something we did not benefit from, that is, support from the establishment, which at least gives you the ground to build up something. But where this will lead, I really cannot say. We just have to watch them grow.

Question : What direction do you envision for the Nigerian theatre in the twenty first century ?

Answer : Whatever I say now will either be right or wrong. I am going to be part of it too, and watch what happens. This country is strange. If there is anything at all that can be predicted about this country, it is just that it is totally unpredictable. Who knows whether we will even still have a country in ten years time? The struggle of the centripetal forces is very strong. Yet, one will like to have a larger unit for ourselves- West African unit, Pan-African unit, otherwise, we won't survive. All the others are coming together in a larger conglomerate- America, China. Europe is already coming together on its own. Asian countries are already coming together, because the future belongs to large unions. Large countries or large multi-nationals will swallow up all the rest of us. Everybody else is preparing for this except us. We are still thinking of disintegration, fighting each other when we should be working toward a West African currency, a West African economic union that will work. Look at Europe now, they are forming a unit using euro currency. That is the future. Unfortunately, like before, we will just be following behind as we have been doing for centuries. We will be carrying the bags of these gentle men. So, it is very difficult to say. I can't even tell you what will happen next year, not to talk of the century. We have to watch what happens.

Question : How will you like Nigerian drama to address these issues that you have just raised ?

Answer : Nigerian drama is very dynamic. Who could have predicted that there will be such an explosion of the video market just a few years after Biodun Jeyifo published his book on Popular Travelling Theatre? With over 112 companies alone in this creative venture and suddenly, Gboom! Everything disappeared overnight. Before you know it, the video had taken over! How would one have predicted that? And we don't even know what is coming on next. There is a resistance to that already. Some people are talking about film now. Who knows what will happen? If some big fund suddenly comes- some big conglomerate just get up to say we want to promote the film industry in the next five years and just sink money into it, who knows? One can only hope that the theatre will still continue to be alive, and functioning. May be there will be a different kind of theatre, I don't know.

* * *

Appendix B

Interview with **Dr. Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju**. (21st January, 2000)

Question: Let me start with the issue of classification of dramatists. What generation of Nigerian playwrights do you belong to?

Answer: I will say third. Not necessarily by virtue of age differential. Those things are sometimes complex, but I think by virtue of the actual moment of intervention in the public sphere and the works, I would say third, though that intervention also needs to be qualified.

Question: When you look at your own writing or the works of other writers who belong to this category that you call the third generation, one thing that is common is the concern with the issue of democracy and good governance, what is actually responsible for this when there are other issues to deal with?

Answer: I guess it is a kind of historical responsibility. History tends to thrust certain responsibilities on you and I guess one mark of being a writer is a high level of sensitivity to circumstances, be it contemporary or historical. So, at that point of intervention, the predominant historical situation continued to be one of social-political aberration, dictatorship, particularly dictatorship of the military variety and of course, the usual fear in a class situation, a situation of the vast majority of the people being deprived and underprivileged. These are situations that sensitise the sensitive writer. It is because that is the prevalent situation that one has to concern himself with it if one has to be relevant.

Question: That brings us to *Awaiting Trouble*. What actually inspired the play?

Answer: Social injustice, especially injustice of the subtle, not easily perceptible type. When there is injustice and you want to prevent such a situation you need some kind of analogy to present it using the medium of the arts. There is also the need for mobilisation. How could you use drama as a mobilisational document? At that point in time, I must confess that there were well contending possibilities in me as a writer. One is the sensibility of optimism, that the situation of injustice can be combated. One is the sensibility of pessimism, that it is difficult to combat the situation because of certain factors. Of course when you consider the Nigerian situation, we have had in our history particularly contemporary history, certain individuals certain groups who have tried their best to mobilise the community but who have failed because they have come ahead of their time or because the community is just not ready. These are various events that were happening all at the same time and so, whereas, it is

important to establish a situation, to try some mobilisation, it is also important to alert mobilisers and the mobilised that there are pitfalls. The analogy that I try to provide is to first, focus attention on the situation of oppression, second, focus attention on the attempt by spirited individuals and groups to lift the society out of that state of deprivation and then of course, the third, to focus attention on the people. At the time I wrote the final bit of *Awaiting Trouble*, the initial bit had always been there, one that posted a fairly pessimistic attitude. That bit had been there and don't forget that we had series of attempts by individuals within the community to try and mobilise people – Soyinka, Fawehinmi, Solarin and so on. Spirited individuals. The play was written in a state of anger. The solution to the crisis is so obvious, so palpable. It is there. All that people needed to do was to come together and grab the solution. But somehow, we have all these impediments. I would not say therefore, that there was a singular event that inspired the work but a combination of all those sensibilities.

Question: The style adopted for the play, which you have acknowledged, is that of epic-Brechtian style. What informed this particular choice? Why not a tragedy for instance to capture the state of anomy in the society? Why not the theatre of the absurd among other choices?

Answer: The objective of epic itself is not just to interpret the world but also to try and change it. To use the play as a mobilisation document, which would involve everybody including the actors, including members of the audience. Yes, I belong to that school of thought which believes that drama could be used for mobilisation and that it is not just a play to be enjoyed. You should enjoy it, but it is something that would mobilise. Drama is a socio-political document. Incidentally, I have written a bit of the play quite early in life, even before encountering the epic tradition, before having a formal contact with the epic tradition.

Question: When was that?

Answer: I will say early eighties. In fact, I would say that the initial draft was done around 1977/78. But I then eventually got familiar with the epic tradition theoretically, such that it was then possible to do a crossbreed. One problem has always been the gulf that sometimes exists between theory and practice. Whether one manages to transcend that or not, I guess it is a question for the audience perhaps to deal with.

Question: It has been argued that epic theatre idea is not something strange to the African especially when you talk of its components like songs, music, and other alienating techniques adopted by Brecht. Ola Rotimi in an article titled 'Much Ado About Brecht' notes that most of these elements ascribed to Brecht in epic theatre were there in African performances long before Brecht himself collaborated with Piscator in the 1920s. Looking at *Awaiting Trouble*, one would see the interaction of

the foreign and African elements of epic. Which aspect of the play would you say is informed by your contact with epic theatre indices and which aspect would you ascribe to your own indigenous African performance indices?

Answer: First of all, you have an admixture of codes and at certain point in time; it is difficult to clinically separate them. Hybridity has become a fact of life especially African life and it is represented in every single aspect of life. The use of language in the theatre, dressing etc. it is like a basic principle in the acquisition of language that a child develops competence in every language that he or she is exposed to. So, when you are exposed to a diverse culture, it is represented in your cultural, artistic output, including language, writing etc. So, at the level of language for instance, the codes are mixed virtually throughout. The major Brechtian epic input, I believe has to do with the deliberate imposition of the alienating elements. The costume of the General for instance, is a deliberate alienating technique. At the level of plot, the inter-position of statements that tend to be direct in terms of socio-political significance and that are sometimes addressed to the audience is an alienating element. The alternative ending which incidentally in the final analysis is not necessarily an alternative end is an alienating element. A director could decide to do away with it but it is there for anybody who has any temper for epic to see. This strategy is to allow the element of pessimism to sink in and I have seen performances where the audience members have broken down in tears at that point in time and then they are more or less roused from this level of despondency and raised to see a possible solution and it made them think again.

Question: The polemics of the play can be located within the theory of social change as posited by Marxism. Looking at the Nigerian situation, and the problem faced by the socialist option across the world today, how viable do you still consider this option?

Answer: My answer is that sometimes a theory may need to contend with what we call a difficult terrain or a difficult phase. Perhaps, a period in time when prevailing circumstances would tend to beguile theory. But I think there are basic assumptions that you cannot take away from the theory. There are also basic prescriptions, which you can only perhaps modify along with particular prevailing circumstances, like the materialist theory of society, the fact that consciousness is modeled or nurtured by these circumstances. I have not seen anybody actually fault this position. The principle that history plays a role in the development of human consciousness and that the solution to any human aberration can be found in its historical antecedents and the prescription of restructuring of the society on humanitarian principles, I don't think that all these can be faulted. Nothing more than this is stated or insinuated in *Awaiting Trouble*. The dethronement of dictatorship is a desideratum, something required, something desirable, and something necessary. The fact that a collective approach is

needed in any struggle is the fact that cannot be done away with. So, the Soviet tragedy, I call it tragedy, is not so much the consequence of a failure of theory but failure at the level of implementation, failure perhaps due to human errors, organisational errors etc. the element of competition which some have described as missing in communism or socialism and have therefore killed initiative leading to the antithesis of the sort of happiness that is envisaged in socialism. I think that has definitely been taken care of by some society. And don't forget that even Western societies have succeeded this far or so much only because at certain point they have tried to approximate some of the prescriptions of socialism, through welfare package. When you give out doughs to the unemployed, what you are doing is applying the principle of 'from everyone according to his might, to everyone according to his need'. That principle cannot be faulted. Even in capitalist societies, you have certain revolutions; you have attempts to dethrone dictatorship. I think it would be false to think that because the Soviet Union collapsed, that means the death of Socialist ideology.

Question: Still on *Awaiting Trouble*, the play is set in a prison. Why prison?

Answer: Prison seems to me the perfect analogy for deprivation and for injustice. That is where we usually have the dregs of the society, precisely those people who are mostly victims of the injustice of the society. So the prison is an irony in itself. Whereas, it is part of the justice machinery, many of the people are actually the products of the injustice in the society. Who is the person that steals? It is the person in need. And of course, there is a lot of stealing in high places. Yet, these people are untouched. The magistrate jails somebody who has stolen a tuber of yam, so it is an analogy for injustice. It is the place where you have the lowest or should I say the highest state of despondency. People who have reached the rock bottom such that it is a Herculean task to give hope to such people because even when they get out of the prison, they are ostracised. It is a challenge, therefore, to mobilise people out of the state of despondency. You have a similar state of depression in society, people who are suffering from injustice, people who are being dominated, etc.

Question: The play presents a challenge to the playwright in terms of handling raw historical data from the society and still being creative. From your experience, how did you manage this, such that drama did not become history?

Answer : I must confess that I have benefited tremendously from a sense of drama which I have imbibed for quite a while. Although I have written poetry, what people have said is that my poetry is basically dramatic. I have also done quite a lot of drama on the television long before the eventual publication of *Awaiting Trouble*. I will say that I have benefited from a sense of drama. The problem is how to strike a balance between the mobilisational needs of drama and the entertainment of the genre. And I

supposed that is why I have approached drama by a means of analogy rather than in straight denotative terms. Again, how far that has succeeded is something that the audience and critics should try to determine.

Question: Who are the playwrights that you found inspiring especially in terms of your craft and performance techniques?

Answer: Obviously Brecht, Soyinka to a large extent and then playwrights like Femi Osofisan and the rest of them. Incidentally, I did do a number of drama before encountering even those contemporary Nigerian playwrights. It is also true that knowing their works in a way played a part whether you will call that part decisive influence is what I do not know. I am really not too sure. May be because I have not written so many plays.

Question: What will you say of the previous generation of dramatists, in terms of their disposition toward the emergent ones?

Answer: They were a privileged generation. It was possible to devote time to art and artistry in their time. They are also privileged in that the socio-economic situation had not been so much bastardised. There was never such a huge stumbling block to creativity in their time. And as a matter of fact, what tends to underscore their privilege is the fact that it has really been difficult to talk about the third generation of dramatists because there have not been renowned voices among this third generation, because the prevailing circumstances just could not encourage or promote art the way it did in their time. Osofisan at some point in time did say that he did not know if he would have been able to write if he had started writing within this era.

Question: Now that the military dictatorship has been replaced with civilian democratic government, what type of drama will you expect under this dispensation?

Answer: Shakespeare said a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. And in one of my own comic adaptation of that saying in a television drama, "werepe" by any other name will itch as badly. So, dictatorship by any other name –civilian, military- is still the same. May be there is a toning down now that there is a so-called democracy. But look at what happened recently at Odi, Choba etc. These are marks that dictatorship is still very much with us, even though it wears another garb. Of course dictatorship does not manifest only in killing, outright shooting, rape etc. but also in policies that tend to continue or aggravate the deprivation of the masses. We are still talking of a hike in fuel prices and other things that will further plunge the masses into a state of penury. At that level, one cannot really say that dictatorship has gone. Even at the level of the polity, it appears as if you do have a democracy, there will still be pockets of manifestations of social injustice, personal injustice, the oppression of the

weak by the strong, oppression across gender lines is still there. Drama will continue to be relevant at that level. These are worthy themes for drama to explore. I think drama responded from the very beginning to a fundamental need or a fundamental stimulus. It responded to the need to express a situation in life, draw attention to them and if possible seek correction to these aberrations.

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Appendix C

Interview with **Prof. Tess Onwueme** (17th August, 2000).

Question: What are the motivating factors behind your writing?

Answer: I do not write simply to entertain but to raise consciousness; there is already enough entertainment going on. In writing, the world is my text; the universe the prospective trading partner, consciously invited to bargain the insights that I bring to show the shifting uneven faces of that world that we may together, see what it is, for what it could become. In my work, I keep probing into the fatty tissue of gender, race and class tucked under the bloody arms of nationhood and globalisation. My mission is to strip the fat, so that the malnourished truths—dressed in the garb of freedom, justice and equality for all may show the lean, naked dimensions of privilege imposed on the poor majority who are constantly being pushed to the shorter end of the socio-economic power and authority in today's selling and buying of (inter) national narratives. This is why I have taken sides with the less privileged women and the poor people of African descent especially who have been on the receiving end of history, and in so doing, both redeem and provoke their weak, stifled images and voices into action. This concern has continued to gain amplitude in my work. As in my earlier allegories—*The Desert Encroaches* (1985) and *Ban Empty Barn* (1986), my recent novel *Why the Elephant Has No Butt* (2000) also consciously reveals the weak “Tortoises”, with other relegated animals of the south-south, struggling to find their place and voice in their world, where the strong “Elephants” and other controlling, powerful animals of the north-west constantly push them to the edge of privilege and power. Equally important is my respective dramatisation of the troubling split in the unequal, classified and en-gendered world of both Ruth and Daisy against Yemoja and Sherifat in *Tell It To Women* (1997), matched with such counterparts as madam Kofo and the chief Alhaji against the impoverished Omesiete and her daughters in *Shakara: Dance-Hall Queen* (2000). Disclosing the ugly faces of class inequality even among women, my quests rise to epic dimension in both *Tell It To Women* and *Shakara*, to enable me probe such dysfunctional truths that “sisterhood is global”. Thus, for me, writing becomes a way of “thinking aloud”, a call to dialogue about burning issues and concerns impacting a world that cries out for true sharing of power, justice and equity. Similar concerns continue to shape my forthcoming novel *What I cannot Tell my Father*.

Question: Who or what particularly influences your work?

Answer: For “writing” the relevant values into my early consciousness through the oral folktales told to me as a peasant child growing up in the rural village of Isah-Ogwashi-Uku, Nigeria, I am ever grateful to my grandparents, uncles, aunts and peers for sharing those oral folktales, which formed the initial texts of my understanding and reading into world literature and culture. Equally significant in shaping the landscape of my consciousness are Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Sembene Ousmane, whose ideological leanings on the side of the oppressed have also marked my own angle of seeing today’s world as a market place where the poor present themselves as prospective agents who insist on negotiating their way out of the margin of loss.

Question: Which generation of Nigerian playwrights do you belong to? In other words, how can we properly situate your theatrical interventions within the context of Nigerian theatre history?

Answer: Your question, I take it has to do with where I “enter” the Nigerian dramatic and literary scene. In that regard I locate myself in what I call “The Third Frontier/Stage”, taking into consideration not just the comparative age of the relevant Nigerian authors, but the crucial moments in which they have entered the Nigerian literary/dramatic scene. From this matrix, my categorisation primarily derives from my relative age, compared to the older generation of Nigerian writers in their sixties and above, as well as the crucial moments and influences that inform my writing. Following this grid, I see playwrights like Hubert Ogunde, Wole Soyinka J.P. Clark and Ola Rotimi entering at the First Stage. Playwrights like Bode Sowande, Femi Osofisan entering at the Second Stage, and writers/playwrights in my age grade entering at the Third Stage.

As an undergraduate and postgraduate student, I had to study the works of the above named writers who in one way or the other seemed to have been “rewriting” what and who preceded them, as well as was with them. For example, one can speak relatively of a playwright like Osofisan as “rewriting” and “restaging” Soyinka’s politics and dramaturgy. And in this creative manner, Osofisan emerges as a product of Soyinka. It is in this same manner that I see myself entering at the third stage of that creative development.

Question: Nigeria’s post-independence politics has been characterised by autocratic rule especially under the military. What is your own response to this reality and how have you reflected it in your dramaturgy?

Answer: Like every concerned Nigerian whose democratic freedom, liberty and development have for long been hijacked by successive military regimes in Nigeria, I have been preoccupied with this issue not just in my private life, but in my writing. Sometimes, I have critically approached the subject head-on in such plays as *Cattle Egret Versus Namma*, *In search of a Theme*, *All of Us*, and *A Scent of Onions*, written

in 1983 as a critique of the Nigerian Second Civilian Administration and which actually ended in a military coup. Other times, I have adopted the more oblique approach to the critique through allegories in such earlier plays as *The Desert Encroaches*, *Ban Empty Barn and Other Plays*, and even in more recent fictional works as *Why the Elephant Has no Butt*, *Riot in Heaven* and *The President's Bag of Luck* (forthcoming). So long as the experience of oppression and injustice continues to shape, transform our lives ---especially those of the powerless masses and the poor, so long would I be tuned to their painful heartbeats and the sources /forces of their anguish.

Question: Democracy has been proffered as the political option before Nigeria in contemporary times. Do you share this view? If yes, how do you think the nation can go about it?

Answer: To me, democracy is not simply an option for Nigeria, or indeed any nation in the world today; it is **THE WAY, THE ONLY WAY** for freedom, justice equity and progress in a civil society. To this extent, democracy is not an option, but the choice for the Nigerian society to move forward and join the team of free, progressive global stage. But then, no system makes, invents, promotes or develops itself, people do. Nigerians owe it to themselves and to the motherland to ensure and insure the survival and growth of the democratic system in Nigeria. But more than that, bearing in mind the fact of diversity that characterises Nigeria, it is imperative for all Nigerians to be forward-looking, by living in the present and for the future, rather than groveling and dwelling in the past, with all its complicated divisive forces. No matter the religious and political differences, unity in diversity must inform and shape the spirit of tolerance and co-existence if Nigeria is to survive, not to talk of moving forward. And on this score, it is the people who must make or unmake not just democracy but the very *raison d'être* of Nigeria. If the fundamental notion of Nigeria and nationhood is in question, of what use is democracy? Therefore, Nigerians must answer first and re-commit themselves to "being" Nigerians, then to the chosen system and principle of government by the majority, which I take it is no other but democracy.

Question: What is your opinion about works of Nigerian male dramatists before and after your emergence on the scene? What distinguishes your aesthetics from that of Soyinka, Osofisan, Clark, and Rotimi for instance?

Answer: I have already located myself and my writing on the Third stage and as a product of the older writers before me. But more than anything else, as a product of the older generations before me, I have acute insights into earlier generation as well as into the peculiar nature and challenges of my own generations, with my own gender. As a third generation Nigerian female writer, I find myself "rewriting" the truths and insights of the male writers (whether first or second generation), regarding

the African Woman. I belong to that “tribe” called the African Woman. I can only see and write that tribe as an insider and from the pivotal experiences and insights of that insider, the initiated insider. As a woman, my capacity to see her is perhaps unlimited. But then, it also confers upon me both the disempowering anguish of limits and the powerful privileges of being woman, an African woman. And so you ask, what distinguishes my work from that of say, Soyinka Osofisan, Rotimi and Clark? These men write about the African woman. I “am” that woman that they write about. It is my tribe that they write about. They can only re-create it. I live it, always! And my creative landscape is peopled and inhabited by the tribe of woman as the primary, permanent residents and voice of ownership, not as incidental visitors, or tenants/occupants at the fringe of my vision. No matter how much empathy and creative vision any of the above male writers may have in re-constructing the African woman, their product of her would remain an “artefact” of woman/womanhood. They can write woman; what they see in and about woman...still from the point of view of outsiders. But they cannot write or speak from the heart “as” woman. What I speak of therefore is the question of authority. But more than likely, I can. I am woman that they create in their vision and work.

Sure we do have male writers who become creative “transvestites” in their writing by crossing gender borders to speak for women with passion and empathy even then the power of such women that they create is often subsumed or submerged in the shadow of a powerful, revolutionary male character. See for example, Femi Osofisan’s image of Yanji subsumed under Sontri’s power in *The Chattering and the Song*, and even Morountodun in *Morountodun*.

Question: Comment on Nigeria’s democratisation struggle, the state of Nigeria today vis-a-vis the position of the Nigerian woman.

Answer: Whether man or woman, what we have in common is Nigeria. And no matter what else separates us on gender, social and economic parameters, our mutual commitment to the being of Nigeria, hinged on democratic principles should always unite us and remain uncompromised.

Question: One observes that in terms of number, there is paucity of female dramatists in Nigeria on the one hand and plays from female dramatists on the other. Do you agree? If yes, to what factors will you attribute this situation? What do you think can be done to address this?

Answer: You may be right in your observation that fewer women enter the Nigerian dramatic scene and consequently, there are fewer plays by women in the marketplace. A number of factors are responsible for that apparent absence.

First, unlike their male counterparts who had the first opportunities to go to school, acquire western education, which invariably translates to power and social mobility for a long time, Nigerian women were sentenced to the kitchen, where the patriarchal tradition said they belonged. The privileges of entering and being in the world stage had eluded not just the Nigerian, but also the African woman for a long time. This is why, even by 1960, male writers like Achebe and Soyinka already had published books in the international market-place, whereas, the first Nigerian female writer (Flora Nwapa) emerged with her first novel, *Efuru* in 1970. Or look at it differently. At the time Achebe's classic *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958, I was only a 3 year-old toddler! And at the time Soyinka was commissioned to write *A Dance of the Forests* for the Nigerian independence in 1960, I was about 5 years old. Now how about that for comparison!

Secondly, drama has always involved production and the ability to produce works at the public stage. Now, those who controlled the public stages were male dramatists, the critics were male, and the publishers were also male. As a woman, they got you going and they got you coming! So where do you go? You got male mountains to climb. Whichever way you look at it, things are beginning to change, but they have not changed much. I have made this point in "Husband Yourself First: A word to the Would-be African Female Writer" This article was recently published in the text *The African Writer's Handbook* edited by James Gibbs and Jack Mackpanje (Oxford: African Books Collective, 1999)

Question: Reading through your plays like *The Reign of Wazobia*, *The Broken Calabash*, *Go tell it to Women*, quite discernible is an abiding concern with problems, hopes, frustrations and triumphs of women folk especially in the struggle against dominant forces of patriarchy. What informs this consistent engagement?

Answer: Society social history and experience with women at the center of my vision.

Question: In view of the above, will you describe yourself as a feminist? Put differently, what is the motivating ideological persuasion behind your theatre?

Answer: I defy labels and band-names. They tend to put you in your place. Or rather, they tend to limit your scope, and confine you to certain circumscribed spaces. The world is my stage, with the woman at its center. Whether that makes me a feminist, or womanist I cannot tell. But then, woman is, has been my life's subject and role. However, my woman does not exist, and should not exist alone or in vacuum. If anything, I see her best in relationship with her male counterpart, as a partner, mutually engaged in creating progress in their world. To this extent, perhaps, I would say that I subscribe to the ideology of "S/hemanism".

Question: Feminism, as a critic recently submitted, is still a scattered, unco-ordinated praxis in Nigerian drama. What is your response to this?

Answer: Maybe, Maybe not. In view of the high mountains of opportunity erected by societies to impede the high mobility of women, I cannot but push for women to strive for equality with men. And why not? But then, one must not genderise the notion of equality to men alone. For indeed, there are women who also already occupy the privilege spaces and positions assumed for men. Now what about such women? Should under class women not be fighting for equality with these privileged women as well? In the case of Yemoja and Daisy and Ruth in *Tell it to Women*. Who is the enemy? Is Okei just the enemy? Or should we be asking for the enemies? What next if and when women attain equality with men like Okei? Is equality going to reign? If not, why not? As I see it, the challenge for women in the 21st century rests not merely on gender inequality but hinges more on class inequality and difference.

Question: On *The Reign of Wazobia*, review the circumstance that led to its writing and production. Who are these people? Anna Kay France and Kendall to whom the play was dedicated?

Answer: These are radical women scholars and professors that I met in the USA who teach and promote women drama I met Anna kay France who in October 1988 organized and hosted the first International Women Playwright's Conference in Buffalo, New York. My play *The Desert Encroaches* was the play selected from Africa among the six international plays to be show-cased during that historic event. In 1991, Kendall (then Head of Theatre Department at Smith College, one of the most prestigious universities for women in the USA) was not only teaching my plays in the Theatre Arts Department, but she actually invited me to give a major lecture in that university to get her students to interact, first hand, with me. As luck would have it, it was this similar occasion that brought Ngugi Wa Thiong'o to speak at the university since the Theatre students were also studying his works. It was my first meeting with Ngugi, my literary idol, whose works had been the subject of my Masters thesis at the University of Ife and later shaped my doctoral dissertation on Osofisan's drama. What more? It was during that first meeting that Ngugi told me that he had been teaching my works with Achebe's on the subject of "African Orature". I remain grateful to Kendall for this opportunity and more.

Question: In the attempt to free the women of Ilaa led by Wazobia from male domination in the play, one notes that although the women are liberated, men (hitherto Oppressors) are equally brought under the domination of women in the resolution. This seems like a replacement of patriarchy with gynocentric hegemony – what a critic has described as an anti-sexist sexism. What is your response to this?

Answer: Maybe this could be regarded as a healthy exchange for a change. And what is wrong with that? If it has pleased men to oppress women over the centuries, may be a reversal of the roles might make the 21st century peculiar on that note. But that does not make it right either. As you can see, I am not simply engaged in re-writing the male writers who have come before me; I am also constantly rewriting myself. That is why I wrote *Tell It To Women*. That is why I position the privileged women like Ruth and Daisy against the underclass women like Yemoja and Sherifat. In that play, the theatre of battle shifts between men and women and relocates itself in the centre of conflict between women and women; in intra-gender politics, not inter-gender politics!

Question: Now, with the military apparently out of power, what are the challenges before the Nigerian dramatists (you for example) in their bid to remain relevant and topical?

Answer: It is the challenge to speak the truth, always, against all odds!

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APPENDIX D

Interview with **Dr. Ahmed Yerima** (21st November, 2000).

Question: How was Ahmed Yerima the playwright made?

Answer: I was born in Lagos on the 8th of May, 1957. I attended St. Bernadite's primary school at Abeokuta. I later came to Baptist Academy. I did my "O" levels and "A" levels there and I moved to the University of Ife where I did my certificate course in Drama, and my B.A. From there, I moved to the University College Cardiff where I did a postgraduate diploma in Theatre Arts and then to Royal College, University of London where I did an M Phil /PhD in Theatre Studies and Dramatic Criticism. But how Yerima the playwright was made was actually my flair for writing in secondary school. I had an English teacher, Mrs. Agboola who was a black American. She was very encouraging. So, by the time I was in form three, I had written my first play titled: Two Man's Daughter, which she encouraged us to produce. I also set up my drama group called The Georgian and Victorian Drama Group. The Baptist Academy Boys in form three, my class at that time and the Reagan Girls' memorial School-form three girls at that time. We had metamorphosised from the Literary and Debating Society and the Bible School which we had every Wednesday. We had a joint Bible training session with the girls. So, it was very easy for me to be able to find female counterparts.

But my real serious training in started with Ife. When I got to Ife in 1976/77 and found Prof. Soyinka, Dr. Yemi Ogunbiyi and more importantly, those who gave me practical training like Laide Adewale, Kola Oyewo, Toun Oni, Peter Fatomilola, and Gboyega Ajayi. Of course, they were members of the acting company- University of Theatre Company. I was the only student at that time of the certificate/diploma programme. I was the only one from outside who did not have a job. The others, Muraina Oyelami, Segun Bankole, Kola Oyewo, Tunji Ojeyemi, Laide Adewale and Yomi Fawole were full-time staff of the University. So it was a great privilege for me to be exposed to these very experienced counterparts like Segun Akinbola, now Oba Akinbola, to guide us. Under Soyinka, I specialised in playwriting. I think I was lucky. He had a lot of time for me. That was the period he was writing *Opera Wonyosi*.

Question: Reading through your plays and works of your contemporaries especially from 1980 to date, one sees a constant engagement with politics. What do you think accounts for this reality?

Answer: I think Soyinka did. Soyinka exposed me to dramatic criticism, satire, and iconoclasm. In the 70s, we brought back the Guerilla Theatre that started at the University of Ibadan to Ife and we called it "Before the Blackout". I was the script

editor. The training was basically dramatic criticism and political criticism. He enlightened our consciousness at that time with lecturers like Biodun Jeyifo, Chidi Amuta, G.G. Darah, Bayo Williams, even the elderly ones like Prof. Oyin Ogunba and Prof. Oloruntimehin. There was a slim chance at that time that you would go through Ife and would not be politically conscious, because at that time, there were so many activities. We were preparing for the 1979 politics. Soyinka made me to understand that the playwright was relevant only as much as he could contribute and make comments within the society. He was not just going to write "art for art sake". At the same time, he was not just going to create works of art and be silent on society. Infact, Soyinka made us to understand that if you wrote and it was not effective enough, you could even pick up arms against the government in order to achieve positive social change. Not just being a social critic but at the same time, you must know that every work of art, even if you cannot achieve change immediately, can contribute toward raising the consciousness of people about the need for a change. That was the kind of exposure he gave to us.

Question: Can we say that, perhaps, that accounts for your own consistent engagement with history, from *The Silent Gods* to *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, to *Attahiru* etc.?

Answer: Yes. Prof. Oloruntimehin tried to make me to read history in Ife. I was very good at courses that have to do with stories. It was always very disturbing at Baptist Academy when Mohammed Yerima had to collect Bible Knowledge/Religious Studies prizes for best students. Then I was teaching at Sunday school. I was in love with courses that would have story lines. I could relate to such stories and be able to understand how I was growing. For me I found out that I needed more than what Soyinka had taught me to be a good critic of the society. I always marveled at the wealth of knowledge, intellectual depth and knowledge of the society that he was treating. In Soyinka's case, he was lucky, because he was part of the history. By 1960, he had written his first play. He had written "My Father's Burden" and *A Dance of the Forests*. Most of the people within the political circles, like Ojukwu and others for example, were his personal friends and those who were not his friends were yearning to be his personal friends. I didn't have such opportunities and since I was not of his age or class, I had to depend on history to understand the society, where the society was coming from and where it might go beyond what we are looking at. That is why history becomes an instrument for me. I use history to establish precedence in my work. I also use history to form a continuum. I say- okay, if it happens at a particular time, then, it must have a reason because it may have happened here and there. I also depend a lot on the culture of the society. There are quite a lot of my plays, which I am trying to put together in a collection. When you read them, you will also find the other side of me when it comes to using the strength of the culture of the people to make a point.

Question: Which one takes precedence? Is it the style of writing or the particular story?

That you want to treat that would determine the theatrical mechanism that you would adopt?

Answer: Both of them come hand in hand for me. I still start from the basic school which is “this is an issue, how do we relate to this? I was just *commissioned* to write a play on late Sheu Musa Yar’adua and I looked at myself from my cradle. I don’t even know him and I asked how do I feel about him historically? I don’t even like him may be because I was radical in school. I believed in Fela Anikulapo’s song ‘Thief thief’ “Obasanjo thief thief, Yar adua thief thief”. So, in my head, I said what is the basis of writing a play for Yar’adua? Is it the money? In order not to make money the motivating factor, I told the foundation not to give me money yet. Let me see if on my own I could find a link and I think I did that with all the historical materials. I allowed the historical materials to give me the story. Then, I gradually infuse my person, my belief, the total thoughts of my reaction on that story, like in *The Silent Gods*, there was no way I could sit down here. I was in government. I was also a member of the advisory committee to the then Secretary of Information. I had so much information on “June 12” and there was no way I could sit down and allow such a thing to happen. The playwright in me kept saying “do something, don’t let this period pass and you would not say something’. Therefore, I found myself sitting down and writing *The Silent Gods* and even tried the system Soyinka taught us, hiding behind symbols, characters and the story to allow those symbols and images to say what you really want. What happened at that time when it comes to style as you said, the story and the style go along. *Question:* You were formerly in the university. How has your present position outside the academia enhanced your creativity, considering the fact that you are now working directly with the establishment ?

Answer : It has in terms of output, in terms of numbers, because my present position places me in a situation where I can write comfortably. I have an air-conditioned office to operate. I can afford, with one or two foreign performance trips to buy a laptop or a desktop. I can afford to go for any research or academic conference both within and outside the university. I am closer to the materials, which places a heavier responsibility on me. Because I am closer to the materials, I know the truth most of the time. I am bound by the oath of secrecy and I am also suppressed and suffused by the need for the writer to express himself. So this is the conflict that I found that with my position, I am more exposed to demands. I have a letter here from the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) saying please, submit your play. I have one from Musa Yar’adua Foundation asking me to write a play. I have letters from the government to write the millennium play. If you asked me while in the university to write about Yar’ adua, I

would tell you that he was a member of the oligarchy. I would use those adjectives that would earn me more popularity within the university and would not write the play. But here, the minister wrote, 'write a play' and so I am bound to be more mature and tolerant in my creative approach within the system. Tolerance, you may say means that I am collaborating with government to suppress the kind of dynamism, which the plays would have had. But I know that I wrote *The Silent Gods*. We performed it in Lagos and it was very critical of the government. But when we got to Abuja, we had to change the theme of the play totally, to fit within the government's demands for the constituent assembly members who were to see it. I also know that I wrote *Kaffir's Last Game*, which was very critical of Abacha government, even at that time. It even mentioned Abacha. During the weeks of performances, I know that each time I was on stage, I was scared whether we would be picked up. But those are the kinds of contradictions that I was saying, which is having such materials, owing also the responsibility of being a government official at the same time with my radical background from Soyinka, with the responsibility of a playwright or the creative mind to express himself also say where do I draw a line. I have a paper which I titled 'Illusion of Social Reality'. I see the playwright as an arbiter. There is another paper that I wrote. These are short short papers but which are my own reactions even intellectually while trying to find myself within the system. Here was somebody who was coming from ABU, the home of radicalism, having been schooled at Ife, the home of intellectual radicalism and you are bringing him within the government system and telling him you cannot do this, you cannot do that. I would say, okay, all right, I need this comfort to be able to work but at the same time I need to be relevant to the society that I am writing for. In order to find that, I must find levels in which I can say one or two things to relate. The irony for me is that the press for a long time did not take me seriously because they did not know whose side I was on. That is why they forced me to write that paper that I titled "The artist as an Arbiter" which was presented at the committee for Relevant Art (CORA). But it was more of trying to find that point of reference in which I would say this is where I belong – to the people or to the government. But I found out that what I decided to do was first to continue writing and not look back, and I hope that one day, scholars would now begin to say, okay, Yerima had to write this at that particular time, but look at what he was trying to say here. He actually was critical of the government that he was working for. He was critical of the situation of the society he was in at that time.

Question: The military is now out. We are in a democratic dispensation. What are the challenges before Nigerian drama? How do *you* think these challenges can be responded to, considering your position as the Artistic Director of the National Troupe?

Answer: I find the civilian government a better government to criticise or write about. The issue of tolerance is there, although you could loose your job at a second because

political thoughts are also involved. But I think the challenges for the theatre is that we have people who this time can listen and who are bound to listen. They are not military men who are scared of criticism. They are put there by a system. And for you to be able to remove them you have to go within the system or attack the system systematically. I mean a play would not remove the Senate President from office, but it could expose the senate president. So what I see theatre doing is to form that part of awareness drive in which you can reach out to people who can listen and say, "this society is not good enough. These are the people involved in the kind of society we are in. These are the kind of people that the society is producing and until so so and so are done, we may find it difficult to move forward, to progress" (pause). There are so many happenings, so much materials for the playwright to work with right now. And there are quite a lot of enlightened minds that would listen and would want to know what is going on. That is the beautiful thing about it and they can't just gag you. They would listen to you. I remember what Chuck Mike did with the "Before the Millennium", got the Federal Government's money to do a play in which he insulted government. They even carried it live on Nigeria Television Authority only for them to realise with the presidency team that it was actually castigating, insulting the people in power.

Question: Do you see yourself doing something like that with the National Troupe ?

Answer: I can never dream of that. And that is where historical plays become very very important, because what you can do with history is to show a historical figure who stayed on in power for too long to show the ills of staying in power and indirectly giving out message which you want which is more on "don't stay in power for too long". You can use history to say that. You can use history to analyse your messages, send your messages by saying that there was precedence for this. "I am not abusing you sir, but since Chief A fell shamelessly when he tried to stay in power for long, why not learn from Chief A" without saying "staying in power is bad, don't stay in power". So iconoclasm is going to be at its best but the problem we have is being able to identify and being mature enough to use these materials in such a way that they are not aggressive, they are not confrontational, yet effective. That is the responsibility of a playwright.

Question: One sees a kind of integrationist approach in your writings. Perhaps, as a result of multi-ethnicity of Nigeria. The interesting thing here is that you are using English which is a foreign language. Within this contradiction, how do you think drama can get to as many people as possible, in terms of style and subject?

Answer: I think the best way drama can get to people is the clarity of intentions and message and research. One thing I find most writers don't do is to make serious research on the subject they write about. The scholar in me helps me to make a lot of

research before I write, no matter how simple the play is. I am just sending a work titled *The Mirror Court Camara* off to MUSON and it is about the effect of Sierra Leonean war. I thank Mrs. Taylor, senior counselor with the Sierra-Leonean High Commissioner in Lagos for materials on Sierra Leone. I also spoke with the Ambassador. So these are the kinds of things that most Nigerian playwrights do not do. The play, *The Sick People* is based on the Urhobo culture, and I know the kind of research I had to do. Right now, an Urhobo director is producing it and most of the actors and actresses are Urhobo. An Urhobo, Bayo Awala, wrote the foreword. He said he learnt in the play, what he did not even know of. That is the kind of thing that I like. I want to write plays that would affect the different cultures. I do not write about Yoruba people because I was born in Lagos. I grew up almost like a Yoruba man. I do not want to write about Hausa people because I am originally Hausa. I don't want to write about Edo people because my mother is Edo. I don't want to write about Delta people because most of my friends are Delta. But I want to write about different cultures. That is the way I have tried to handle it. When you read *Attahiru*, you will know I am a Muslim. When you read *The Bishop and the Soul*, you will think that I am a catholic or a Christian. By the time you read *The Sick People*, you will think I am Urhobo. There is a beauty in Nigerian languages. I found out that each one has its own pattern, its own images and symbols. What I love doing is using proverbs and I want to use proverbs in such a way that they make sense within that context. So, when a proverb in *Attahiru* is being said, you will hear images like camel hooves. When the ones from *The Trials of Oba Ovomramwen* is being said, there are images of red blood, indigo, forest, clay etc. You will find that most of the images in the languages are interwoven and I hope that I use that to break the language barrier. I don't know how other playwrights do it. Sometimes, playwrights' use Pidgin English to break the barriers. I write one or two plays but for me, it didn't work that way. I found that for my play to be relevant to the society that I am writing it for, I need to make a research, a deep research into the topic and therefore, reach the immediate audience that the play belongs to. So what I try to do is to make sure that those images used are images that are universal, so that people can understand. In *Atahiru*, where it says "when the thief comes to steal from his neighbour and he says no big deal but when he hears that they are coming to him, he starts shouting foul!" this is a common thing. I try to do that because I find that all Nigerian languages no matter who is speaking have rich proverbs and idiomatic expressions and if you stick to those, you will cut across the language barriers.

Question: Can one therefore say that the eclectic approach is a deliberate feature or element of your theatre?

Answer: It is. Definitely, it is, because when you talk of a playwright wanting to be relevant to the society, you must find deliberate approaches toward reaching your audience. And if you don't, then you have a problem. Even when I try to create a

fictional village in *The Silent Gods*, I still had to use certain standard norms that you would find the audience accepting. Then the society can say we accept the lovers, we accept the father saying no. We accept the tussle for the kingship, we accept the seer because there is a seer in every tradition. So, I think we must have a deliberate discourse.

Question: That brings us to the play *The Silent Gods* particularly. You have talked about the June 12, 1993 election crises that motivated it. Beyond this can you recapture the condition or circumstances that led to the writing and production of the play?

Answer: *The Silent Gods* for me was a play where I was trying to find a way of saying something. I wanted a play through which I could create my own society and make my own comments and move the people around and to seek a solution within my own concept of the dramatic reality. I approached it, using the Nigerian materials, at the same time, trying deliberately to create many contradictions so that you would not see through that. But I also wanted to be able to sit back and make a comment on the June 12 issue. I don't know whether I failed or passed.

Question: You have just mentioned that you had written the play and by the time you got to Abuja to perform it for the government audience, you had to make some changes. What are those changes? With those changes, do you still see the play as it is now as your play or what the government wanted?

Answer: I did not publish the government version. I published my original version. When I wrote it, I gave it to the then Artistic Director of the National Troupe, Mr. Bayo Oduneye to read. He was very daring. He wanted a work he could relate to, a work that he could do and still find a point of relevance for himself. So, he went about it and it was easy for us to be able to realise that. When we did it in Lagos, at the National Theatre, we did not know that men of the State Security Services SSS had been sent because some people had watched it and mentioned it to the government, that there is a play going on in Lagos, which is very critical of the government and what was happening. But it was a beautiful play. The government, having had so much of the comments, sent SSS to come and see it; The SSS came and wrote a report. Abacha had taken over and at the same time, M.K.O Abiola had been arrested. The Constituent Assembly members were meeting. Infact, they had just finished. Prof. Jerry Gana had taken over as Minister of Information. He had not seen the play in Lagos. So he invited the play to Abuja. I don't know who prompted him but he wanted to give a befitting send-off to the members of the Constituent Assembly. He called us to Abuja. When we got there, without seeing me or the artistic director, he granted an International press interview, telling them how the Constituent Assembly was very successful and how he was going to give them a wonderful play titled *The Silent Gods*, which would highlight for them the beauty of Nigerian Culture and society.

When he finished and got back to his office, they presented him with the SSS report. We were outside while he was granting the press interview; we had been called from Nicon-Noga where we were rehearsing. He wanted us to be present at the press conference, but along the line, we said, "sir, you don't need us, you are the minister and anything you say covers us. So, he now called us in and showed us the SSS report which claimed that the play was explosive. I didn't know what to do, including everybody around. Some of his advisers wanted it, some did not. Then his personal assistant, Mr. Iyke Nwokike then said, Sir, Yerima is a writer, the oyinbo who made the pencil also made the eraser. The man wrote this play, which everybody says, is excellent except this SSS report. Why don't we see this play tonight, and see the things that the SSS report has raised and other things. This is the artistic director too, Mr. Oduneye. We will tell the same Yerima to give us a new script that must be called "The Silent Gods" because you have announced to BBC, VOA etc that it is "The Silent Gods" Let duneye direct it. By tomorrow, we give them "The Silent Gods" at 7'0'clock" The Minister agreed, and asked us to proceed to do it. That is the beauty of being a Federal government playwright, because if I were to be outside the system, I would have insisted that my play be done as I wrote it. But because I was an officer of the government, it was no longer a plea but a command.

We went back that night the minister with his entourage came, saw the play and everybody took note. We showed him the play as it was performed in Lagos. We now took the SSS report. We looked at the points raised: i.e. the young couple Dide and Kike must marry, the king must not die and the play should end at this point, no dead body must be brought. There were a few other things here and there. At the end, there must be a resolution. The man with the calabash must be seen with the staff because the insinuation is that are we saying that Abacha was not the chosen one? Did I know of any coup? Immediately, I said I did not know of any coup. I just wrote to create and if my creativity would put me in trouble, I would withdraw the creativity. We did the changes. I gave them their play and I did not touch the script again. I was so upset like any normal human being. I did not touch it until three years later when I had the gut to pick it up again. By then, Jerry Gana had gone. Abacha was on his way out. Though he had not gone, he was not as strong as before. Even the SSS man who wrote the report had been retired. So, I decided to publish it.

Question: In the preface to the play, you implied that the striking similarity between the contemporary events and the content of the play is a kind of accident.

Answer: I had to say that to save my neck because the similarity was too stunning. I was becoming afraid because most of the people discussing it were seeing it more as a play written for June 12 or on June 12. I was becoming a June 12 hero. That was not what I wanted to do. I felt if you concentrated on that aspect of the play, then you lose the thematic thrust. People would begin to misunderstand the play. *The Silent Gods* was not written for June 12. It was written as a reaction to the society at that

particular period. People were being denied their positions. Even after elections, even after the gods had elected them, and the future of Nigeria was on the brink. That was why at the end, I bring in the young virgin. My wife asked me when Obasanjo became the president that 'is this the virgin you saw'. I said for the sake that he was born again in prison and God had given him a new inspiration, may be in that sense, he is a virgin.

Question: That ending is like the Greek *deus ex machina*, which is not the direct resolution to the conflict already developed. The virgin is like an intrusive intervention from outspace.

Answer: I had to do that because I did not just want to end it by bringing in the gods. The things were so complicated. The scenario was too complex for me to understand as a playwright. Maybe, like the Greek writers, I opined that only the gods can resolve it, but that is why I end it with the spiritual cleansing; the broom part. I found out that that was the only way Nigeria could go. We needed to cleanse and purge ourselves and hand it over to God. And look at what God did. By the time he came, he first took Abacha, and later Abiola. And then, people started wondering what was going on.

Question: Were you not making a gender statement with the virgin solution in the play?

Answer: No! no! no!.What I meant was that I wanted somebody new or renewed.

Question: The play is like a One-act play. It does not have the conventional divisions of acts and scenes. Is this a deliberate experiment?

Answer: It is. With all my plays, I do not have Scene 1 Act 1. For me, I believe in motivation. I believe a story motivates the action. It moves me to the next action I find it very difficult to break my line of thought. I have three computers that I work with when I write. What I do is to write scene 1 or the opening of the play. When I get worked with one machine, I go to another machine, I put scene 2 and then take another to write scene 3.etc. when I bring them together, what I have is that line of thought at that particular time when I was fixing the computers. It is no longer what happens here and there. Most times, I like one act plays. I have developed my one act plays and I want to publish them in a single volume into a big play. It is only the big historical plays where I am forced to write different scenes.

Question: Looking back now, what is your assessment of the public reception of *The Silent Gods*?

Answer: I have a paper which I want to publish in what I call “Random Thoughts” Let me read this (he reads) “ ... 16 years later, as a civil servant and playwright, I thought I was matured enough to handle the contradictions it provided.... In my case as in Soyinka’s, I had chosen the right time to write the play. Like Soyinka, I also had a theatre company to use to project the play, but the contradiction was the person of Yerima. The audiences were suspicious of him as the agent of government. Whose side was he on? The press deliberately played down the celebration as a timely social commentary. Yerima himself got caught up in meandering through the political web of the issues he was raising. To some members of the audience, it was courageous. But when the play was invited to Abuja, Yerima’s contradictions became further highlighted. The irony is that no single interpretation can be given to a work of art intended to be an arbiter of a social crisis. Yerima’s *The Silent Gods* became what each side of the fence wanted it to be. For the play to be fully accepted by either group, it had to metamorphosised, so it did. Yet, the truth remains for art of theatre to be relevant or to be arbiter in political crisis, the artist must be prepared to cross boundaries. Yes, a frightening decision which either leads to acceptance or rejection. No wonder therefore, that like a conquered hero of a wrestling match, the director of *The Silent Gods* asked in all seriousness on the way from Abuja “Yerima, write me a new play, simple straight comedy, one that would make people laugh. No politics”. With this new request, I thought I had failed in my attempt to cross the line and play the arbiter. I even believe in my failure as an arbiter until I received a letter from somebody ... Alhaji Amodu who had seen the play in Lagos. He opened his letter thus:

Dear Ahmed Kaka Yerima,

Good day. I hope your play The Silent Gods was successfully staged at Abuja before the Constitutional Conference delegates. I enjoyed the play when I watched it earlier in the month. Although the play left me asking questions to which I had no ready answers. Your play is quite timely, relevant and pertinent because it mirrors the present political situation in the country. The play also admonished the political heavyweights or power players to exercise some degree or amount of caution, maturity and a spirit of accommodation for ones fellow contestants or political opponents’

As I read his letter, my self-confidence returned. For the most crucial of all relationships that bind the artist, his art and his function as an arbiter is the receptive relationship with the audience. Politics is conflict. Art mirrors that conflict and where socio-political conflict is the predominant issue of a work of art, negativism, positivism, criticism and cynicism are usually the receptive reactions.”That is what I tried to explain in the paper and it captured the audience reception of the play.

Question: What principle(s) inform (s) creation of characters in your plays?

Answer: I create characters and look for reasons why they exist, what is going on in their minds. I believe when you wear an 'agbada', it means that you have no problem, but I believe that if you look deep, then you will find emptiness. My plays strip all characters of their outer coverings, leaving the audience with the real beings that form the inner human psyche. That is what I always like to do. I use my plays to examine situations because I believe the human mind is always the most complex machine. That is why you find in my *Ovonramwen* a portrait of him as a victim of circumstance. This is a little different from how Ola Rotimi saw him. Rotimi saw him as a Greek tragic hero who towers above all men and he is in conflict with the gods and he falls. I saw him as a victim of circumstances and ironically, that had belittled him within the concept of Benin kingdom. The Benin Oba is a god. I accept that image, that he is a god, but the human aspect, the human element in him is enough to bring the god down.

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Appendix E

Interview with **Esiaba Irobi** (5th March, 2001).

Question: Give us an insight into the making of Esiaba Irobi, a poet / playwright of note among modern Nigerian writers.

Answer: He is a retarded genius.

Question: Which generation of Nigerian dramatists do you belong to?

Answer: Those the future forgot. The lilies of the valley. The Cattle Egrets in exile. Busy abroad, fucking white women.

Question: Are there dramatists who have provided inspiration or model for your Theatre?

Answer: Yes. Hannibal, Adolf Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. Abacha, Babangida.

Question: One observes in your plays as well as those of other contemporary Nigerian playwrights, an abiding concern with the issue of good governance and democratic development. What accounts for this preoccupation?

Answer: The disaster that we call our country.

Question: What is your assessment of Nigeria's democratisation efforts especially from the second republic to date?

Answer: This is the final republic. The country will explode in few years time.

Question: What role do you think modern Nigerian drama should play in the Current "post-military " era. Put differently, what thematic /formal direction would you recommend for theatre in the current civilian democracy'?

Answer: To lance the ribs of the new monkeys with the stick. To continue to search for forms that will encourage our people to participate in the processs of creating changes in government and forment an ideology of education.

Question: What do you think distinguishes your dramaturgy from that of writers? like Soyinka, Clark, Rotimi, Osofisan etc?

Answer: It is rooted in indigenous Igbo Ritual Aesthetics

Question: Now, let us go to *Nwokedi: a Play*. What actually motivated the writing and performance of the play?

Answer: The Debacle called the Second Republic and the apathy of my own generation towards change in government.

Question: One sees a kind of eclecticism in the aesthetics of the play. What do you think?

Answer: In a shrinking and fastly globalised world, eclecticism is inevitable.

Question: In the play, which determines the other: the aesthetics of Ekpe festival drama or the political mission of the writer ?

Answer: They are like the cup and the wine. The vagina and your orgasm. Your penis and a jet of fresh hot semen.

Question: Which of the following do you consider as the most fundamental Problem with Nigerian politics: ethnic, class or generational differences?

Answer: The ethnic/religious issue.

Question: The play seems to centre the Nigerian crises primarily on inter-generational crisis of confidence. If yes, Why?

Answer: Because, as Franz Fannon said: every generation must out of relative obscurities, discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it.

Question: Arising from the above, do you subscribe to the imperative of Newbreedism as promoted by the military regime that was in power when the play was premiered?

Answer: I think that what we need in Nigeria is a young leader like Thomas Sankara or Samora Machel or Jerry Rawlings before he became fat. We need somebody who had military training and combines his sense of precision and execution of duty with the connectedness and patriotism

of an involved and visionary politician. Vision and Pragmatism. Not the kind of cunning or Machiavellianism of Babangida or the motor mechanic approach of Olusegun Obasanjo. We need somebody like Chukwuma Nzeogwu in civilian uniform. Idiagbon in Civilian uniform. The vision to change Nigeria can only be pushed through with a gloved rifle butt or sheathed bayonet. (Western-style democracy will never work. It will always end up as a government of demons for demons and by demons. Demoncracy) The approach I am suggesting might involve slicing a few throats. But isn't sacrifice always necessary for change. Look at how many people died for South Africa to be free.

A younger age is important in the sense that the leader is yet idealistic and not thinking of consolidating himself by stealing all our money and investing it in Wall Street as Babaginda has done. May he die of cancer of the penis. If only our women were interested in politics or can even read newspapers, perhaps a leader might have sprouted from that breed which, in Nigeria, wastes half of its time perfuming and drying their genitals

Question: To what extent is the generational perspective of political conflict influenced by the regenerative goals of Ekpe festival?

Answer: In the same way that every politically pragmatic play is always Influenced by the mythopoeic impetus or impunity of a culture's orature.

Euripides: *The Bacchae*
Shakespeare's *Macbeth*
Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*.

Question: The dominant mood in the play is that of passionate rage. Are you "Looking Back in Anger " like Osborne or why the rage?

Answer: I was frustrated. I could foresee the future in its splendour of blood. Remember Ken Saro-Wiwa?

Question: The protagonist, Nwokedi jr. treats elders with contempt and irreverence. This is contrary to African tradition of respect for age. Is this not a minus for his character?

Answer: He respects his mother. She is also an elder. What is fucking up Nigeria and my own generation in particular is this reverence for corrupt elders with no moral centre and no vision for the future. Remember what Jerry Rawlings did with the Ghananian fossils? Executed them! I suggest that we get all our political invalids, shave them upstairs and downstairs,

bind them hand and foot, put them in a leaking boat and push them onto the Atlantic. Another option is to execute them by public strangling.

Question: What accounts for the coincidence between the Western calendar that makes December 31 the end of the year and that of the Ngwa people who celebrate Ekpe festival at the same period to mark the death of an old year and the birth of a new one?

Answer: It is the harvest period, which was shifted from October because of White collar jobs and the Xmas holidays.

Question: Were you a member of Buccaneer while in school or how much autobiographical is the flashback scene involving the organisation in the second cycle of the play?

Answer: My friends were members of the Pirates Confraternity. I did not join because I knew that my generation was going to pervert the revolutionary ethos of these organisations. As you can see, the cult that is supposed to be regenerative became degenerative in the Nigerian context.

Question: In the exploration of local resources of performance and in the Evocation of the tragic spirit, *Mvokedi* shares these attributes Of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Any Influence?

Answer: If I could write a play as great as *Death and the King's Horseman*, I Would get married and have children and stop toiling, knowing that I have written my name where neither rain nor wind can erase it.

Question: On a general note, please comment on the state of scholarly criticism that has attended modern Nigerian drama so far.

Answer: The best has been by foreigners. Kacke Gotick for example, Green, Wright, There are few outstanding scholars such Ogunba, Izevbaye, Obi Maduakor, but our best critics have been in the area of indigenous theatre: Amankulor, Enekwe, Adedeji, Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Biodun Jeyifo.

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