



Revolutionary aesthetics in the dramaturgy of Tunde Fatunde

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Abstract

This essay, “Revolutionary Aesthetics in the Dramaturgy of Tunde Fatunde” calls attention to the unacceptable delineation of the Nigerian society along class lines. It portrays the inhumanity meted out to the greater majority by the privileged few. The study shows that being a committed, socially conscious dramatist, Tunde Fatunde employs revolutionary aesthetics because he has to be on the side of the masses and he has to encourage them to do all that is necessary to shake off the yoke of oppression and exploitation. The Marxist theory, which naturally triggers a search for social change, transformation and liberation, is, thus, applied in carrying out a thematic analysis of four of Fatunde’s plays, namely: *No more Oil Boom*, *No Food, No Country*, *Oga Na Thief Man* and *Blood and Sweat*. The Nigerian socio-economic and political landscape shows an unjustifiable inequitable distribution of wealth leaving the majority in appalling sub-human conditions. This study shows that the political leadership and their cronies – friends and relatives outside government - are responsible for this state of affairs. The research examines the thematic concerns of the four plays and in the process brings to full realization the sad state of affairs and agrees with the playwright that this sad state of affairs can be changed not by aid or foreign intervention but by the collective effort and will to fight of the people.

Keywords: revolutionary aesthetics, marxism, privileged few, oppressors, less privileged majority, oppressed, exploitation, revolt, social transformation social change

1. Introduction

This essay is premised on Inih Ebong’s assertion that,

The writer as a revolutionary thinker strives always to change the world; to redirect and channel the mind and conscience of his people towards a new set of values, a higher awareness or reality (72-73).

With the myriad of problems plaguing the African continent, no creative writer can afford to apply his creative talent purely for the purpose of entertainment. On the contrary, most African writers strive to use their work to call attention to the appalling conditions of the generality of the people. Affirming this assertion, Uwem Affiah (2012) ^[3] avers that “no committed writer with a conscience can ignore these conditions” (285). Adding his weighty opinion to this, celebrated Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe (1975) ^[1] opines that it is not to be contemplated, that an African writer can turn a blind eye or pay deaf ears to the sub human conditions and the cries of the overwhelming majority of exploited, oppressed, denied and dehumanized people of Africa. The foregoing implies that creative writers are duty bound to be socially conscious. Their works have to manifest their social vision. Uwem Affiah (2009) ^[2] opines that:

A dramatist shows social consciousness when he interrogates social issues in his environment. He is socially conscious if he responds to such issues and shows an awareness of the dynamics and interplay of the positive and negative forces determining as well as

affecting the hopes and aspirations of members of the society. This ensures that the writer draws his materials from common, daily, yet topical issues (143)

Literature plays an important role in either concretizing the set social norms and values of a society or revolting against those norms and values. If the set norms and values are positive and pro-people, then it is alright for literature to contribute in concretizing them. On the other hand if they are negative and against the interest and well being of the people, then literature, coming from a socially conscious and committed writer, is bound to revolt against them. A socially conscious and committed writer will always be on the side of the people. The four plays which this essay examines are: *No More Oil Boom* (1985) *Oga Na Thief Man* (1986), *Blood and Sweat* (1985) and *No Food, No Country* (1985). The four plays are found in a volume *No More Oil Boom and Other Plays* (2006). All four plays are written by Nigerian playwright, Tunde Fatunde. Tunde Fatunde writes primarily about Nigeria though the Nigerian problems are replicated either to a greater or lesser degree elsewhere in Africa. We will then be correct if we say he is concerned with the plight of the down trodden everywhere on earth as depicted for instance in *Blood and Sweat* and he recommends the panacea to end oppression wherever it exists.

In Nigeria, while the leaders and captains of industry, together with their friends and relatives, who are in an absolutely infinitesimal minority, live in opulence, affluence and obscene wealth derived from the commonwealth and from the toil of the people, the greater majority, the masses, the toilers; live in

disgusting, sickening, horrendous and shocking conditions.

Over the years, Nigeria has been defined by a poor educational system, corruption, poor health care system, abject poverty, unemployment, denial of social justice and the likes. Fairness, justice and equality died long ago in contemporary Nigerian society.

During the Aka-Bashorun Memorial Lecture held by the Ikeja, Lagos Branch of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) in Ikeja, Lagos, in 2013, Nasir El- Rufai reiterated the findings of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. Okonjo-Iweala is the Harvard trained former Finance Minister in Nigeria who after a study, concluded that 80% of Nigerians hold 35% of the nation's wealth while 20% hold 65%. This means that 20% of Nigerians are in the upper class while 80% are in the lower class. In virtually every aspect of life the growing inequality is evident as well as escalating.

Nigeria is rich and well endowed. Sadly, its resources and commonwealth have been misappropriated, stolen and embezzled by a very corrupt and privileged few as opined by Achebe (1984). The wealth and natural resources of a country are the sovereign property of its people. Sadly, a few powerful ones have appropriated these to themselves. They feed on the sweat of the oppressed majority. No employment, no health care, no education, abject poverty, environmental degradation and sundry challenges are what they have to contend with. It is a society disgustingly stratified.

In this type of society, any literary work which attempts to make the people feel that what is happening to them is normal is propagating the state propagandist idea. It is a state (propaganda) apparatus. A socially conscious and committed writer is conscious of the happenings around him. He will rebel and revolt against this status quo and sensitize the people towards demanding a better deal for all. It is here that Tunde Fatunde and the primary texts of this study belong to.

2. Revolutionary Aesthetics

It seems pertinent to say a few words on the concept of revolutionary aesthetics. In the words of Udentia, revolutionary aesthetics is "a specific, ideological reaction to the contradictions of capitalist and semi-capitalist societies and a purveyor of a new vision of social reality embodied in the theory and practice of revolutionary change" (9).

Revolutionary aesthetics is a creative response to the appalling conditions under which people in some places live. Udentia Udentia further asserts, "for us, revolutionary aesthetics is a reaction to a given world situation in a specific context, and establishes this reaction in a variety of manners, forms, genres, etc, all these having a direct bearing on reality" (11). Put differently, it focuses on the oppressed masses that are both marginalized and subjugated. Ahura opines that revolutionary aesthetics "aims at increasing man's awareness of his human potentials" (95-96). Thus, the creative artist applies revolutionary aesthetics by opting to sensitize or 'conscientize' the debased man and urge him to seek escape from his predicament and assert his humanity. It means that by a creative handling of the work, the masses are convinced to participate in any process that will liberate them and create a fair society. According to Udentia, "revolutionary aesthetics has very specific and identifiable features... some of which are service to the people ... close bounds with the working

people's struggle, etc. (9). Revolutionary aesthetics implies that the artist stays on the side of the people, condemning the oppressor and showing the oppressed people ways by which their liberation can and will be achieved.

3. Theoretical Framework

The Marxist theory is applied to study and analyze the primary texts. This theory examines a literary text in the politico- socio- economic context in which it is written and explores and explains the relationship between the writer and the society.

Some scholars regard this theory as an extreme brand of the sociological approach to literary studies. Class struggle has been a major subject of writing for many African authors. The African continent is replete with instances where the commonwealth is in the hands of a select few while the majority suffer. Therefore, there is great and urgent need for the liberation of the people. Eugene Ervin avers that:

In the third world context, freedom means more than emancipation from hunger, thirst, political violence, homelessness and even physical abuse. It also involves the yearning to create and enjoy economic, political, educational, social, psychological and cultural conditions that would ensure a maximum realization of human potentials. (14).

The intellectual tenets of the Marxist concept were inspired by two German philosophers, Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. As a theory, Marxism seeks to understand literature from the perspective of historical materialism, for according to Charles Bressler, "because literature is part of a society's superstructure, its relationship to other elements of the superstructure and to the base becomes the central focus in varying Marxist literary theories" (120). In this view, the economic system is a base while social relations are the superstructure. In the work the *Communist Manifesto*, authored by Marx and Engels and published in 1845, Bressler says they proclaim the doctrines of Marxism. Principally, they urge the masses to rise, revolt and strip the bourgeois of their economic and political power and place the ownership of all property in the hands of the government (118).

The impact of Marxism has been felt in literature. Marxist literary scholars do not accept the concept of 'art for art's sake'. They believe that the Marxist theory is capable of unveiling the ideology of a text whether it be overtly or implicitly expressed. Emmanuel Ngara states that "this is due in part to the fact that Marxism reveals the relation between the text and external reality, between authorial ideology and the dominant ideologies of the epoch" (8). Connectedly, Christopher Butler upholds that, "it is the attempt to reveal hidden implications of the text consistent with their ideology that is crucial to Marxist interpretation" (112).

Ngugi Wa'rhiongo hypes the place of Marxist analysis in literature when he asserts that

Literature cannot escape from the class power structure that shapes our everyday life. Hence, a writer has no choice whether or not he is aware of it; his works reflect

one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one of the other side in the battlefield; the side of the people or the side of the social forces and classes that try to keep the people down-what he cannot do is to remain neutral- every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics. (Preface to Writers in Politics).

The opinion expressed above by Ngugi Wa 'thiongo implies that a writer has to portray the struggles in society in his works. Ezekiel Mphahlele seems to agree with this when he says "...there will always be the passionate outcry against injustice, war, fascism, poverty. It will keep coming at us, reminding us that man is as wicked as he is noble and that the mass audience out there is waiting to be stirred..." (180). Before we summarize and conclude this section, let us recall that Kolawole Ogungbesan believes that because a writer lives in a world which demands action, he has to make himself relevant. Thus, "if it is necessary to throw bombs in order to change society, then the writer must recognize his obligations to the society and throw as many bombs as possible" (4).

This medium does not permit us to go into an elaborate, prolonged and exhaustive discussion of Marxism. There is neither space nor time for that. We should then note that Marxism in literature pays attention to the class issues in society. It points out the oppressive and appalling conditions of the down trodden. It seriously frowns at and rejects the idea of wealth being in the hands of a select few. It believes that the society, its wealth and resources belong to all the members of the society and should be equitably distributed. Marxism aims at correcting the anomalies in society and establishing an equal and classless society, if possible. Above all, it stands for and encourages the revolutionary spirit in the masses and urges them to urgently rise and take back what belongs to them from the oppressors.

4. Methodology

This is a research report. In this report we offer a random selection of four plays by Tunde Fatunde – plays with a thematic similarity - oppression and exploitation and the call for revolutionary change. The nature and demand of this research endeavor call for desk research methodology. The essence is that it offers us the opportunity of identifying various shades of oppression and exploitation across the four plays. Also, we have adopted the qualitative and analytical research methodology type. This method enables us to obtain data via virtual/library based method. All these models ensure the credibility of our discussions and observations.

5. Delimitation of the Study

We felt a strong need to say a few words on this – to delimit the study and answer an often asked question – what about style?

We are ourselves, literary scholars who believe that the distinction between literature and other disciplines is brought upon literature by form. By form, we mean style or literary qualities and aesthetics. Being a journal publication, we won't find the space to discuss four plays in all ramifications.

Therefore, this essay is focused on the thematic concern of the

four plays. As the heading informs, it is a thematic analysis of the four plays from the point of view of revolutionary aesthetics. Note, however, that theme is an aspect of literary aesthetics and a defining characteristic of drama.

6. Revolutionary Aesthetics in the Dramaturgy of Tunde Fatunde.

Tunde Fatunde sees the society in which he lives as a class society, divided along class lines into the privileged or the oppressor class and the less privileged or the oppressed class. Thus, he calls for a violent revolution that will overthrow the oppressor capitalist machinery. He, therefore, advocates a Marxist socialist ideology which will see the bulk of the proletariat have a fair share in the nation's wealth.

We have stated in the theoretical framework that the exponents of the Marxist socialist ideology: Karl Marx, F. Engels and Lenin were concerned with the phenomenon of exploitation by the capitalists. They were interested in the scientific relationship between the two groups. They see the masses as the producers of the wealth yet they are the ones occupying the lowest echelon of the socio-economic ladder. This position presupposes that the society is unjust and there is inequality in the distribution of the wealth of the society. Hence, the Marxist like, Tunde Fatunde, uses his works to advocate for a revolution during which the masses will dismantle the capitalist state and install an equitable and classless society. Tunde Fatunde's plays *No More Oil Boom*, *No Food, No Country*, *Oga Na Tief Man* and *Blood and Sweat* are heavily pregnant with Marxist impulses which lend credence towards the struggles of the oppressed class and their material existential destiny. Tunde Fatunde situates his plays within the proletarian traditions and sees social and political change as the only panacea that can put a stop to this bestiality which is the oppression, subjugation, exploitation and denial meted out to the proletariat. Political independence which was seen as socio-economic and political freedom from colonial strangulation turned out to be a mirage. The African elite nay Nigerians who stepped in to occupy the vacant positions created by the exit of the white imperialists came in and foisted many forms of exploitation and psychological bondage on the people.

Ngugi Wa 'thiongo describes this as

A betrayal of trust by an indigenous elite that has taken over power with the active support of the people, to continue the same inequitable system as the colonial oppressors... (36).

Ngugi, Fatunde, Sembene, Iyayi, Nwamuo, Osofisan, Omotosho, to mention but a few have all portrayed this betrayal of trust by our leaders. This situation of deceit is a familiar index in almost all African countries. It is a corroborated symphony of colonial paradoxes and indigenous cabals. The insatiable urge for materialism and greed create a gulf between the privileged few and the less-privileged majority thereby exacerbating the tensions and contradictions in the society which Tunde Fatunde has explored. Thus, literature becomes a tool through which the masses see the reality of their existence. According to Obafemi:

Literature must be such that it should help the ordinary people to push history forward through charity, passion, identification with, and the intervention in the objective lives and living conditions of the majority of a given people (46).

It is pertinent to expose these social evils and the predators who feast on the sweat and blood of their human kind. Fatunde sees literature as a viable instrument in the fight for social change. He sees literature in ideological terms and this he weaves aesthetically in order to liberate the masses from the exploitative tendencies of capitalism.

In *No More Oil Boom* Fatunde depicts the institutionalized corruption and moral degeneracy of our leaders with succinct clarity. Various institutions, government agencies and our educational institutions are all culpable. Affirming this, Okoh Goddey in a review of *No More Oil Boom* writes:

A revelation of the evils which characterize the oil age in Nigeria; evils which are still very endemic in the main stream of our national life... the language is simple because as money went to people's head during boom, respect for everything sacred was lost (*No More... 4*).

The inefficiency in our nation's hospitals with the near death of the consciences of its staff in the craze to join the bandwagon of money spinners results into a revolutionary struggle by the workers who mobilize themselves. Hear Hassan:

Enough is enough ...I repeat, enough is enough. As from now we shall all fight corrupt social systems until they are completely destroyed... At work, the factory managers make life difficult for us. At home, landlords do not allow us to sleep (*No More ...46*).

The consciousness gotten by Hassan underlines the revolutionary message of Fatunde in his play. The workers and their kind must unite under a committed leader to form a formidable force to oppose and dethrone capitalism and its practitioners. In his attack on the exploitative class, Fatunde does not leave anyone untouched. Right from the landlords to members of the customs service, to the Vice-Chancellors and their cohorts, the oil money has made a lot of them to go crazy: Alhaji Bauchi's utterance will suffice:

Infact, this radio announcer talks like Ronke, my darling. A very sweet girl in bed. She is one of my mistresses; I always go to London every weekend with her in order to attend disco parties (*No More...55*).

This shows the level of irresponsibility of the leaders of the country. They place priority on ephemeral pleasure and wasteful spending of resources instead of channeling it into meaningful developmental projects that will benefit the masses.

This theme of corruption and exploitation is continued in *Blood and Sweat*. The playwright uses the American Reagan Gold-Mine to show how the workers are exploited as a result

of the corrupt practices of management. The workers are owed arrears of salaries and reduced to inhuman treatment. In the preface to *Blood and Sweat* from the previous edition, Iyayi has this to say:

... The theme of *Blood and Sweat* is class struggle and therefore similar to that of *No More Oil Boom*, but the link between the two reflects the playwright's deep understanding of the relationship between the on-going class struggles or struggles for national liberation in different parts of Africa (*Blood...70*).

Though the play is based on the apartheid policy in South Africa it has a universal application to all nations where man's inhumanity to man is the tradition. Hence, the oppressed must rise up to challenge the status quo. They must not see their situation as God divined but a manipulation by man. For instance Iyayi says *Blood and Sweat* is emphatic that the problem of South Africa is first and foremost a class problem; a problem of the inhuman capitalist system based upon the cruel exploitation of man by man... (70). In order to keep the workers in perpetual servitude they are subjected to all manner of inhuman treatment. Either they are whipped with hot iron or raped. At times they cause dissension among the working class through a diplomatic ploy called divide and rule. But injustice, corruption and exploitation must not persist forever. It is through Mzilikazi that the revolutionary message of Fatunde is hatched. Hear him:

We should be ready to take the bull by the horns. I will write this list of demands. I will put my name. I am ready to sacrifice my life in order to protect the present and future interests of African workers (*Blood...90*).

A leader has to have the impetus to champion the course of the workers and be able to organize their kind to challenge and topple the capitalist regime. This is affirmed by Neil Aggett:

... the first aim of the revolution is to seize power through armed struggle. The second aim is to make sure that workers control the mines, industries and farms. This means that workers must be fully represented in the management boards of these key industrial sectors (*Blood 114*).

The message is that the working class will continue to fight capitalism and its structures until communism is installed, where everybody including the workers will have a say in the way the country is run. The way the play ends shows that class struggle is still continuous.

Capitalism is the cause of so many atrocities in the country. It is responsible for the massive looting which has rendered the country comatose with unemployment, economic bankruptcy, erosion of moral values, purposeless policies, dysfunctional public utilities and visionless leadership daily staring us in our faces. Our leaders have failed us grossly. Kwame Nkrumah's picture of post-colonial apocalypse will suffice:

For the colonial bourgeoisie, the class which thrives under colonialism, is the same class which is benefiting

under the post independence neo-colonial period. Its basic interest lies in preserving capitalist social and economic structures. It is therefore in alliance with international monopoly finance and neo-colonialism, and in direct conflict with the African masses, whose aspirations can only be fulfilled through scientific socialism (37).

Fatunde continues characteristically in his crusade to expose corruption that has permeated the whole fabric of our national life. *Oga Na Tief Man* is a succinct dramatization of the travails, pains, agonies and predicaments of unemployment as a result of the institutionalized corruption in the country. Alhaji Alao, Alhaja Alao, Justice Kanayo, Mrs. Kanayo are all representatives of the corrupt half that have dominated the Nigerian political scene and are responsible for the problems militating against the progress of the nation. The money for contract awarded for the importation of raw materials is diverted to personal use thereby causing artificial shortage of production materials and consequently retrenchment of able bodied citizens of the country and non-payment of arrears of salaries. Listen to this.

Justice Kanayo: Chief Alao you do well. God go bless you.

Alhaji Alao: (Smiling) My dear Judge, why you dey thank me?

Justice Kanayo: Well, why I no go thank you. No be you help my wife deposit one million dollars for my private account for London-England. You know say e no easy to carry naira from Nigeria to oversea.

Alhaji Alao: Justice Kanayo na Allah and Mohammed you for thank. You know say I get 15 million dollars import license to buy chemicals and spare parts for my bisikit factory. But I come use de money import holy white sand from Mecca because I get de contact to build one big mosque. dis importation of holy white sand from Mecca and everything patapata, come to 15 million dollars. 5 million dollars from 15 million dollars how much remain?

Justice Kanajo: 10 million dollars

Alhaji Also: Na im I come deposit one million dollars for your wife inside your private bank account. (*Oga Na* 159-160).

Their behavior is no different from vampires who feast on the blood and sweat of their fellow humans. While many are striving and forging ahead to survive despite nonpayment of salaries, millions of dollars are stashed away in foreign private bank accounts. Offiong Ani Offiong is of the opinion that “the common theme noticeable in the play is summarized as struggle against corruption, exploitation and oppression” (190). Akin to this is the theme of moral degeneracy. The pursuit of greed and pervasion of justice have caused many to mortgage their sense of decency, integrity and self pride.

What Alhaja Alao cannot fix with her money she feels she can with her ass. Nowadays, ‘bottom power’ is a very powerful instrument that is employed by powerful society ladies and other categories of women to get things done. Our leaders are easily manipulated by this means and turned into puns in the hands of these women. To stop this drift into retrogression, the under privileged must come together in one front to fight.

Barrister Alao’s prophetic statement in the court is very significant:

My Lord, revolution is inevitable in a society where very few, powerful and influential men and women deliberately make it impossible for the working people and their families to work and live decently. (*Oga Na...190*).

The oppression, exploitation and massacre of the under-privileged continue in *No Food, No Country*. It shows the author’s vision. Uwem Affiah is of the belief that “a dramatist shows social consciousness when he interrogates topical issues in his environment. He is socially conscious if he responds to such issues and shows an awareness of the dynamics and interplay of the positive and negative forces determining as well as affecting the hopes and aspirations of members of the society. This ensures that the writer draws his materials from common, daily, yet topical issues” (143). *No Food, No Country* is a dramatic portrayal of the forceful seizure of the farmlands and massacre of poor farmers and their families at Bakolori by the police at the instance of the government in the 1980s in Bakolori, Sokoto State of Nigeria. These farmers are rendered hopeless. Their source of livelihood is taken away from them without consultation and compensation further emphasizing the exploitation and oppression noticed in *Blood and Sweat*. To show the greed and corruption and betrayal of trust that characterize the Nigerian polity, the local politicians, traditional rulers and religious leaders who are supposed to protect the interests of their people connive and collect the compensation money. Listen to this:

Aishatu: My people make I tell una something. ...one day, prince Shettima, one Retired Brigadier Owoboriomo, wey dem sack from the army because e steal government money, all of them come my papa house. I dey return from hospital that time. Dem dey discuss, all of dem come agree sey dem go sell una land to oyinbo company and de oyinbo company go give dem plenty, plenty money and big, big cars. (*No Food... 336*)

The deployment of armed policemen to unleash terror on defenseless peasants, wives, women and children is the highest level of man’s inhumanity to man. This is reminiscent of the reign of the worst dictator the world has ever had in the person of late Idi Amin of Uganda. According to Femi Shaka “Tunde Fatunde succeeds in creating a tale of deprivation, oppression, struggle and liberation” (from the introduction to the previous edition, 281).

The success of the revolution by the under-privileged class at the end of the story shows the author’s belief that the only solution to the endemic problem of the country can only be resolved through mass revolt.

A critical examination of the various plays studied reveals one characteristic running through them which is class struggle. Thus, the characters become symbolic. In *No More Oil Boom* Oba Gbolaga represents the corrupt traditional institution and this is what we notice in *No Food, No Country* in the character of prince Shettima, the Emir of Bakolori who betrays his

people. They constitute the exploitative class. Professor Owokunle, Vice-Chancellor, University of Lokoja, Chief (Pro.) Frank Eyo and Professor Ojeli symbolize the rot that has infiltrated our tertiary institutions. The Vice-Chancellor will leave the business of academics to pursue contracts to enrich himself. Furthermore, Alhaji Bauchi in *No More Oil Boom* and his type Alhaji Alao in *Oga Na Tief Man* represent the corrupt contractors who have continued to feature prominently in the scene in Nigeria since independence. Brown Kennedy, Mr. Mussolini and his wife Mrs. Franka Mussolini represent the foreign collaborators expropriating the masses. Uche Okafor, Ugochukwu, Imodu, Hassan in *No More Oil Boom* and Ndlovu, Mzilikazi, Sithole in *Blood and Sweat* represent the oppressed, the under-privileged class.

7. Conclusion

The plays under studies are a clear exploration of the multifaceted levels of corruption, exploitation and oppression the poor masses have been made to face as a result of a few corrupt persons. Tuned Fatunde represents the new voice of the people who must make his message clear to the understanding of all. These things must stop. A time will come when the masses would no longer hold their frustration and would burst out to wrestle power from the hands of the oppressors and exploiters.

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