



The playwright as child advocate: An analysis of Chris Nwamuo's *the last song*

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Abstract

Children who are the most important segment of any society are also among the most vulnerable. As a result, they are entitled to certain human rights that serve as a means of protecting them against abuse. This paper explores how the playwright acts as an advocate for the child through his creative work. Chris Nwamuo's *The Last Song* is selected for this study. Through in depth analysis, it reveals that both parents and society in general, have a responsibility to protect the child from psychological and physical abuse. The play also portrays the dual role of government, not only as child rights protector through policy documents, but also as upholder of the law which punishes offenders of child rights abuse. Furthermore, this paper establishes that by re-enacting some of the abuses meted out on the child and the catastrophic physical and psychological effects on the unfortunate victim, the playwright supports his belief in child advocacy and hopes for a positive change which can only be brought about through the efforts of government and relevant stakeholders.

Keywords: Nigerian drama, playwright, child abuse, child rights, human rights, advocacy

1. Introduction

Asigbo and Okeke reveal that playwriting is an art that "deals with the intricacies involved in creatively putting on paper in the form of drama, ideas for the edification of man" (p2) and the playwright "functions as a visionary who utilises recent experience as perspective on both the present and future" (Dandaura:179). This means that the playwright either upholds and encourages what is right in the society or condemns what is wrong with a view to correcting these wrongs. This paper explores how the playwright, Chris Nwamuo in his creative work – "The Last Song", condemns child abuse in the Nigerian society and acts as an advocate for child rights.

The menace of child abuse is something that is prevalent globally and as a country Nigeria is not left out, not only does it affect the future of our children but portrays the image of the country in a negative light. In Nigeria, many children become victims of abuse, violence and exploitation despite the joy culturally associated with bringing a child into the world. There is no standard definition for the term "child abuse", suffice it to say that any act on the part of a parent, guardian or any adult that comes in contact with a child, and which results in physical or emotional harm, exploitation, sexual abuse or even death is child abuse. Child abuse in Nigeria takes many forms, among which are: female genital mutilation; child marriages; child labour; kidnapping; neglect and molestation – physical or sexual.

Because children are easy to victimize due to their stature, weakness and mental capabilities, certain conventions, laws and policies have been put into place both internationally and locally to protect their rights. Olaitan Olusegun and Amos Idowu in their paper "Child Abuse in Nigeria: Dimension, Reasons for its Persistence and Probable" state that "International Conventions were put into place to protect children from abuse and exploitation and to develop standards and principles for the betterment of child survival and protection". These conventions include: the International Labour Conventions on Child Labour; the

Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child of 1924; and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child, 1979; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) of, 1989; the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts; and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography; and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child of 1999 which states that children be protected from torture, inhuman, or degrading treatment, physical, mental or sexual abuse, and neglect or maltreatment.

Some of the National Laws listed which deal with child rights in one form or another, can be found in: The 1999 Nigerian Constitution; Matrimonial Causes Act, 2010; Criminal Code, 2004; Matrimonial Causes Act, 1990; Criminal Code Act, 1990; Labour Act Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN), 2004; Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act, 2003; and the Child Rights Act, 2003. Olusegun and Idowu opine "Nigeria has developed a number of policies, plans, and strategies that provide an enabling environment for child survival and protect them from abuse". Some of the policies are: National Strategic Framework for the Elimination of Obstetric Fistula in Nigeria, 2011-2015. According to these scholars. the World Health Organization defines Obstetric Fistula as follows, "obstetric fistula is an abnormal opening between a woman's vagina, bladder, and/or rectum, through which her urine and/or faeces continually leak." This condition may be complicated by recurring infections, infertility, damage to vaginal tissues, and paralysis of the muscles in the lower legs. However, the possibility of occurrence of fistulae can be reduced if pregnancy is delayed until sexual maturity is attained" (12); National Policy on Child Labour, 2013; National Policy and Plan of Action on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation in Nigeria, 2002; The National Plan of Action on Orphans and Vulnerable Children (2006-2010) of 2007; and

The National Policy on Education, 2004.

In spite of these laws and policies that put in place to protect the rights of children, many are still subject to various forms of abuse on a continuous basis. This is because the provisions remain largely ineffective due to poverty, corruption, negative attitudes of parents, lack of rehabilitation of sexual offenders, poor enforcement mechanisms and inefficient judicial processes.

Contemporary issues of child abuse and child rights have been reflected in several Nigerian works of prose such as: Chinamanda Adichie's "Purple Hibiscus" (2003), Helen Oyeyemi's "Icarus Girl" (2005), Uzodinma Iweala's "Beasts of No Nation" (2005), Chris Ubani's "Becoming Abigail" (2007). Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, Julia Okoh, Stella Oyedepo, Wole Soyinka and Yerima Ahmed are some of the playwrights who by implication have condemned human rights abuse, be it in adults or in children.

Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods* (1973) touches on the issue of male child preference. Ogwoma is neglected as a girl child because her parents prefer to cater to the welfare of their son. The issue of a person's right to freedom of will, independence and individualism is dealt with by Onwueme in "The Broken Calabash" (1984). The protagonist, Ona is an *Idegbe*, "the name given to an only daughter and child of a marriage in Ogwashi Uku clan of Delta State, Nigeria. She is expected not to be married out but to remain at home to propagate their lineage. However, she has the choice of marrying another female into the family to take up her role of child bearing". (Worugji: 2010) ^[12]. Okoh in *Edewede* (2000) discusses the issue of female genital mutilation, a cultural imposition on the female child/adult with traumatizing effects.

It is important to note here that the focus of Sofola, Onwueme and Okoh is not on the troubled childhood of their protagonists. Though they depict some of the forms of child abuse, it strictly from the perspective of the feminism. E.E. Azunwo and E. K. Omovwionmo, share the view that they are feminist playwrights as their plays "have strong themes and subject matters relating to social ills in Nigeria especially as encountered by women". (2) Soyinka and Yerima on the other hand, focus on the child in their plays "Camwood on the Leaves" (1973) and "Aetu" (2007). Soyinka's "Camwood on the Leaves" has been described as a "vitriolic attack on child abuse" (Majahana: 45) in which the child-parent bond between Reverend Erinjobi (Father) and Ishola (son) is totally destroyed due to conflicts between them. In "Aetu", Yerima focuses on girl-child marriage as Aetu the character who the play is named after is only 14 years old and has been forced into marriage with Oke who is an old man. Taye Awoyemi says the main focus of the playwright seems to be on the psychological trauma caused by early girl-child marriage. Unfortunately, Yerima "does not deal with the physiological disadvantages of marriages contracted among early teenagers as Aetu is made to birth three (3) years to three (3) brothers" (9).

From the fore going, it is obvious the Nwamuo is not the only playwright that writes about child abuse. However, the researcher is of the opinion that child abuse is not a dominant thematic concern of Nigerian drama and that playwrights do not necessarily advocate for child rights even when they characters have troubled childhoods/adulthoods as a result of abuse. Nwamuo, on the other hand, makes it the main focus of his play as he not only identifies the menace of child abuse in some of its

forms but also advocates for child rights.

2. Bio-data of Playwright:

Nwamuo is a theatre practitioner and a scholar who focuses his work on exploring the post-colonial society and how it dehumanises its inhabitants due to the realities of life. Nwamuo was born in 1948 to Deacon Sam Nwamuo Nmeregini and Madam Martha Ugonwa. The young Nwamuo attended St. Anne's Primary School, Ahiaeke and Stella Maris College, Port-Harcourt. He later obtained a B. A. (Hons) degree in English from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He has, in addition, bagged a Post Graduate Diploma in Language Arts from the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife); a Masters degree in Theatre Directing; and a Doctorate degree in Educational Theatre both from the University of South Carolina in the United States of America. Through hard work, he has risen to the academic rank of Professor and has numerous global recognitions, citations and honours to his name. His plays include: *The Prisoners* (1985), *The Substitute* (1986), *The Squeeze* (1989), *The Wisdom of the King* (1992), *Save Our Lives* (1992) and *The Last Song* (1995). *The Wisdom of the King*, *Save Our Lives* and *The Last Song* have been republished as a collection titled *Three Plays* (1996).

3. The Last Song: A Synopsis

The Last Song dramatises the lot of Nwadiuto, a young 11 year old girl-child who was born as a result of a love affair gone sour between Nma (her mother) and Chuka (her father). Both parents shun their responsibilities towards their daughter, failing to love and care for her. Nma, for the selfish reason of wanting to devote more time to her new lover, Emeka and also as a result of the inability to cope financially, sends Nwadiuto to her father Chuka. Chuka on the other hand, is now married to Chioma and they have a son called Obinna. At first, Chuka refuses custody of Nwadiuto, but he later gives in and allows her to live with him and his family. Both Chuka and his wife, psychologically and physically maltreat Nwadiuto who is eventually locked out of the house and is found by the Police. This culminates in a court case where judgement is in favour of Nwadiuto. Chuka and his wife are fined ₦500,000.00 or are to face a two year jail term as punishment for the abuse of a child. They are also asked to establish an educational insurance fund for 20 years which will cover Nwadiuto's education up to the tertiary level. In the play we also catch a brief glimpse into the lives of two other female children, Onyinye and Odo who are street hawkers of oranges and buns respectively. Both of them are sexually abused. Onyinye by Uk the Carpenter and Odo by Iron the Mechanic.

4. Child Abuse and Child Right Advocacy in *The Last Song*

Many children around the world, and specifically, around Nigeria, lack food, education and even shelter. These make them vulnerable to different kinds of abuse perpetrated by those in society that should love, care and protect them, especially parents and family members. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, "abuse in all its forms is a daily reality for many Nigerian children and only a fraction ever receive help. Six out of every 10 children experience some form of violence – one in four girls and 10 percent of boys have been victims of

sexual violence". (Unicef.org). This should not be the case as child rights are legislative and institutionalised frameworks put in place to protect children from exposure to violence, abuse and exploitation.

Ajaegbu, the narrator in the play prepares us for what the play is about when he says,

Narrator: ...My heart is heavy laden with sorrow because of what I see in this terrible society of ours. A society which tortures its offsprings... A society which encourages its offsprings to partake of the bitter pills of life...the agonizing experience of life, long before they are ripe for it. My heart bleeds as I walk the streets and see children with their wearied bodies borne by their tired feet. (Pause). Their tender faces smiling wryly at their predicament: their forced responsibilities to support their families, the wicked treatment meted out to them for trying to be themselves, denying them training and development, exposing them to risks and hazards as a result of our inadequacies, strains and disappointments (75).

Nwadiuto, the protagonist in the play experiences these kinds of abuse as seen in her account before the judge. In tears she says:

Nwadi: (Sobbing) My mother said I did not feed my junior brother. My father said I did not dry his canvass shoe very well. Both of them threw things at me, beat me and drove me from the house (108).

We see that Nwadiuto is made to labour, is beaten and thrown out of the home.

In *The Last Song*, Nwamuo portrays the lack of parental responsibilities as a major cause for putting children at risk. The family is one of the most important social institutions made up of men, women and children. While the men and women are adults capable of fending for themselves, the children are helpless minors who are weak and therefore dependent on parents for support and development. However, due to changes in socio-economic, political and cultural development there are many implications for the child. Economic pressure, acquisition of material wealth and the need to earn more has caused many families to decline in their functions and responsibilities for the child. Nma, Nwadiuto's mother says she can't cope anymore

Nma: ... I can't buy myself things that I need simply because I have to take care of Nwadi's needs, and her education. My salary is barely enough for the two of us (77).

While, she laments that her meagre ₦25,000.00 salary is not adequate in "these hard times", the underlying reason for sending Nwadiuto to her father is because she wants to be with her new lover, Emeka without Nwadiuto being a hindrance. The narrator tells us that "Despite pleas from friend and daughter, Nma stuck to her selfish scheme" (84) Another way in which parents have failed in their

responsibilities towards their children is seen in the issue of child labour. While we see Nwadiuto labouring hard in the home, it is in the characters of Onyinye and Odo (the orange and buns girls) that the playwright seriously advocates against child labour. Child labour exposes innocent children to many kinds of dangers such as rape and sexual molestation which inevitably denies them of their childhood and a bright future. In the play, the orange girl who is only about 13 years old understands what the carpenter wants from her when he touches her breast. At first she dislikes and refuses to play but she realises that she can make a good sale, she gives in and has sex with Carpenter:

Orange girl: ...You de craze. na how orange you wan buy wey you de touch me like that. I beg stop am. Me I no de for that kind play you hear...(91).
Carpenter: ...Okay I go buy all of dem for Hundred Naira. You hear? (Slapping her buttocks). (91).

It is obvious that Onyinye is having sex with the carpenter for the first time unlike in the case of Odo, the Buns girl and Mechanic which seems to have had sex before, not telling how many times. Unknown to Onyinye, Odo is wiser and understands that she can make a quick sale by giving in to sexual demands as seen in her conversation with Mechanic. The lack of parental responsibility is also presented from another perspective by the playwright. Parents are supposed to be firm and not to always give in to their children. Obi, the son of Chuka and Chioma, is an over pampered brat who knows how to wrap both parents around his little finger. He is never given any age appropriate chores around the home; Nwadiuto was there to always serve him. It is evident from his mother's comments that he is not doing well in his education:

Chioma: Obi my dear, you just have to learn if you must pass your examinations. Your mates will be in Secondary School next year and you are still in Primary Three. How are you ever going to make it, with this type of attitude? (94).

Obi has a really bad attitude; we see it when he lies on Nwadiuto for not giving him enough food (95). His parents fail to inculcate in him moral principles, good values and discipline, another form of child abuse. Many of the irresponsible and unproductive members of our society such as, miscreants, armed robbers, thugs and militants are results of this form of child abuse.

In advocating child rights, the playwright looks at government and its intervention. We are given a look at government intervention through the roles played by the Police and the Judiciary. The Police find Nwadiuto on the streets and take her in so as to protect her; they also press charges against the parents (Chuka and Chioma). The Judiciary on the other hand, find the parents guilty and punish them for infringing on Nwadiuto's rights as a child. They are fined and in addition, must set up education insurance for 20 years.

5. Nwamuo's Dramaturgy in *The Last Song*

The playwright presents this play with varying techniques

and stylistic features. To begin with, the thematic concern is that of child rights and their abuse by members of the Nigerian society. Solomon Ejeke in a comment says “The Last Song is a classic expression on the theme of child abuse which is current, topical and relevant as it is universal” (114) and Imoh Abang Imenyi buttresses this when she says...”the playwright raises a lament over the malaise of child abuse (146). It is in this lament that the playwright advocates for the child.

We are told that “the play is set in contemporary Nigeria” (74) and this is reflected in the names of characters and indigenous Igbo songs which give the play an African flavour. These songs are rendered by village women and are mournful in tune as the women are “weeping for a lost child” (76). This is a reflection of the sad theme and the loss of childhood due to abuse. However, the playwright fails to translate the songs into English which impacts upon the non-Igbo speaker who cannot make meaning of the lyrics.

The play is structured into 9 short sequences, each presenting a different action that moves the storyline along in a linear manner. All sequences except sequence 4 are devoted to Nwadiuto’s story. However, in sequences, 1, 6 and 8, only the narrator appears to tell us what to expect or to comment on the situation of things. Sequence 4 is where the playwright digresses from Nwadiuto’s story to focus on the issue of sexual molestation, another abuse of child rights. Sequences 1-3 and 5- 9 make up the main plot while sequence 4 can be said to be a sub-plot. The play’s plot structure is also very important to its success. Nwamuo makes use of exposition - the narrator gives us opening information; the initiating incident - Nma decides to take Nwadiuto to her father; Obstacles – Ego, Nma’s friend who tries to convince her to change her decision; Central Conflict – between Nwadiuto and her father and stepmother: Climax – Nwadiuto is sent out of the home; Resolution – Nwadiuto is found by the police resulting in the court case with judgement in her favour.

Nwamuo’s characters all play roles that move the story along and help in conveying his message. The children whose rights are abused and whom he advocates for are seen in Nwadiuto, Onyinye, Odo and Obinna. Nma, Chuka and Chioma are adults who are symbolic of failed parental responsibilities. Uk and Iron represent other members of society who also abuse children while Ego as stated above, plays the role of an obstacle trying to stop Nwa from sending her daughter away. Opoko (Police Officer), Ijioma (Court Clerk) and Nwogu (Judge) symbolise the government who advocate legislatively and judicially on behalf of the child. Finally, Ajaegbu, the narrator is depicted as an old man who walks with the aid of a walking stick. He symbolises wisdom and acts as the advocating voice of the playwright:

There are many children like
Nwadi who may have been killed,
kidnapped and used for ritual sacrifice,
who may have committed suicide, who
may have joined an under-world gang or
who may have become prostitutes.
(Pause). There are many children like
Nwadi in our various cities. They grope
about without a future, wasting away.
(Pause). Let us save our children
(Pause). Let us show them love and

affection. Let us give them a future to
hang on to. (Pause)... (105-106).

Ajaegbu is the omniscient narrator; all knowing as he tells what is happening to the others, especially Chuka’s feelings for “the torture he has made Nwadi pass through” and Nma’s “sweet love turned sour” (105). Whenever, Ajaegbu appears, the lighting grows dim. This helps the audience focus on him and what he has to say which is of utmost importance to the action in the play. Many questions are raised by him, for example: “Ever seen such a happy family?”, “How can a mother abandon her own child because of foolishness?”; “How can a father be so insensitive as to inflict torture and pain on his own child?” These questions are rhetorical and are used to drive home the point and gravity of the message.

The playwright uses language to portray his characters in a realistic fashion. Characters like Onyinye, Odo, UK and Iron speak Pidgin English; which depicts their level in society as well as their educational background. The Police Officer, Court Clerk and Judge speak in English but also use the proper registers for their profession. The only time we see the use of ethnic language is in the Igbo songs. Overall, the language of the play is simple enough for all to understand.

6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the playwright, in *The Last Song*, creates an awareness of the dangers of child abuse and neglect as a social problem which takes place in many settings such as the home, and on the streets. By implication, child rights abuse has varying consequences on the psychological, physical and social development of the child and the image of the Nigerian society in general. Nwamuo does this successfully through his dramaturgy making the message of his advocacy, loud and clear. Finally, this paper submits that parents, teachers, guardians, the legal systems, the family support programmes and governments need to condemn child abuse and set up adequate requirements to handle the menace efficiently so as to lead to its total eradication.

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