

CORRUPTION CULTURE AND RETROGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENT
IN SELECTED PLAYS OF OLU OBAFEMI
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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the portrayal of the culture of corruption which has led to backward development in Nigeria as depicted in Olu Obafemi's *Scapegoats and Sacred Cows* (2003) and *The New Dawn* (2015). This work employs desk- research method through textual analysis of Olu Obafemi's *Scapegoats and Sacred Cows*. With patriotic zeal, academic candour and creative ingenuity, the writer

dramatically draws attention to the obvious and disguised all-pervasive high level corruption in all the fabrics of the society such as nepotism, embezzlement, advance-fee fraud and ineptitude with the concomitant result of retrogressive development evident in unemployment, lack of patriotism and social amenities like water, electricity, housing, health facilities, poor transportation systems, inflation, poverty, hunger, deprivation, weak economy and weakening power of the nation's currency as well as gross insecurity which has led to the development of a new economic culture of flourishing kidnapping trade, inter alia. With insight from age-long stylistic approach to literary studies, this paper establishes the fact that the writer uses literary devices such as symbolism, allusion, satire, good diction and several appropriate figures of speech such as euphemism, hyperbole, simile, metaphor, personification and alliteration to stylistically portray the unfortunate gradual entrenchment of corruption culture with its negative effects of retrogression in Nigeria. This paper concludes that Olu Obafemi has ingeniously condemned the corruption culture and its effects of retrogressive development and pervasive insecurity with the use of characters and other literary devices that ultimately and optimistically demand a positive change in the land.

Keywords: Corruption, Under Development, Poverty, Retrogression.

INTRODUCTION

Every society has its own writers. Such writers are expected to reflect issues of the society in as much as they are not islands on their own. The contemporaneous Nigeria has produced several writers of repute and one of them is Olu Obafemi, a Professor of English at the University of Ilorin. He is a poet, playwright, dramatist and novelist. As a committed prolific writer, his works usually have direct bearing with his society, exposing, satirising and condemning unethical, oppressive and retrogressive issues. Two of his works that deal with untoward societal issues in Nigeria are *Scapegoats and Sacred Cows* (2003) and *The New Dawn* (2015) which specifically condemn the issues of corruption culture and retrogressive development in Nigeria.

Development as a term means, inter alia, “the process of gradually becoming bigger, stro

more advanced” (ibid, page 428). In a nutshell, it is a form of growth that is progressive, ethical, value addition and productive, a thing of pride and joy. Such are upward developments. However, there may be unusual developments which one may construe to be downward developments because they are destructive, oppressive, unedifying, unethical, inhumane, regrettable, uncivilized, of reducible value or anti-progressive. It is disapproving to the extent that this paper regards it as a menace constituting retrogressive development in any society where it rears its ugly head.

Corruption Culture in *Scapegoats and Sacred Cows* and *The New Dawn*

Scapegoats and Sacred Cows is inter alia, to ensure “the restoration of equity, justice and the end of marginalization” (p. iv) in the society at large while that of *The New Dawn* is (also) to ensure “the collective struggle of all the oppressed”. These two separate but inter-related motives have common issues of corruption culture and retrogressive development. It is, therefore, appropriate to bring into the fore the acts of corruption in the two plays.

Su’eddieAgena (2012:1) affirms that commitment in literature has moved to the portrayal of the evils in the present day society. Hence, Olu Obafemi is not left out of the movement. On page 8 of *The New Dawn*, the playwright exposes the inglorious corruption culture of hiding workers’ files under the carpet in order to deprive them of promotion. Thus, we have Dele, one of the characters saying that “it is unnecessary to keep people’s promotion files Under--- carpet to gather dust”.

Secondly, the corruption culture of workers illegally and immorally possessing personal private companies is satirized by the playwright on page 11 of *The New Dawn* through the confession of Tayo, one of the characters while mimicking the boss:

I tell you, me, I don make am.

I retire today, --- I fit be managing director

of at least ten companies, Odu and Sons, Lagbaja

Enterprises, Tamado Brothers e.t.c. --- I get life ticket. MM related motives have common issues of corruption culture and retrogressive development

Yes, it is the one thing I've prepared myself for as a man in charge of contracts in this ministry.

Thirdly, closely related to the above is the corruption culture of private practice by workers, be they in the public or private employment. In *The New Dawn*, workers are pictured as being involved in the practice which is given the abbreviation, "pp". The doctors, nurses and so on do it as evident on pages 19 to 21 of the text. Drugs are diverted to private clinics "which they jointly owned with the physicians" (page 21).

Fourthly, the corruption culture of collection of 10% (ten per cent) on every contract does not escape the literary ingenuity of the playwright as evident on pages 18 and 21 of *The New Dawn*:

---contracts have been won,
ten per cent in their leaps
and bounds (page 18).

They line their pockets with
their percentage for awarding
contracts for drugs --- (page 21)

Also, the corruptive heinous act of looting and vandalization of containers at the seaport is satirically given attention by the playwright as evident in the conversation between Aina and Dele on page 23 of *The New Dawn*:

Aina: I know where. In the wharf among looted containers landing from foreign trips.

Dele: Destined never to get to their destination.

In a manner that is akin to the view of Elechi Amadi (1983: 35), the committed writer is one who consciously uses his writing as an instrument for furthering the cause he believes in. Olu Obafemi frantically and unequivocally denounces the culture of excessive abuse of power in *The New Dawn* when he writes in the introduction that:

The New Dawn dramatizes the power, lust and cannibalism that characterize the regimes of Jean Bedal Bokassa of Central African Republic, Idi Amin of Uganda and the successive rulers in Nigeria --- civilian or military. A case study is the slaughtering of school children in Bokassa's Central African Republic --- (page iv).

The playwright goes on in *The New Dawn* to further dramatically establish the continental nature of the corruption culture in Africa when he uses the youngsters and the praise singers to humorously

and satirically inform the audience that the mineral resources of various countries have been corruptly drained:

Youngster: (Call response mode)

Our Diamond --- in Central d'Afrique

Our Petroleum --- in Oloibiri

Our Uranium --- in Namibia

And our Copper --- in Zaire

All: The whole has been drained (page 27).

As far as the playwright is concerned, there is no form of corruption that is excusable. Through one of the characters (Dele) in *The New Dawn*, Olu Obafemi affirms that any infraction is corruption:

Dele:---Everything belongs together.

The man who kills to steal a car

or the one who takes a ten per cent from

a contractor he awards a contract to buy

computers for a newspaper's newsroom are

with thieves --- (page 10).

Since realism and truthfulness are essential ingredients of literary commitment to one's society, the playwright is seen in *The New Dawn* not to excuse his elite's constituency when he affirms through the 3rd Youth (a character) that they (the elite) often get the appointment of "political advisers --- as side compensation" (page 41) from the corrupt and oppressive rulers apparently to silence such "elite radicals" in the face of obvious man's inhumanity to man by the heartless rulers.

In the bold effort to portray the endemic corruption in the Nigerian nation state, Olu Obafemi makes use of some literary devices which include symbolism, satire, appropriate diction and characterization as well as figures of speech. Due to space constraint and since the scope of this paper is not only on the devices, only some of the devices will be pointed out and exemplified.

Symbolism is a major device that can be deciphered to have been used by the playwright as indicated below from *Sacred Cows and Scapegoats*:

- i. "Sacred Cows roast and feed on *Scapegoats*". (page v and elsewhere in the text) symbolizes the fact that the corrupt and oppressive rulers are predators.
- ii. "*Scapegoats*" symbolize the oppressed masses who are the "preys" upon which the predators feed and the masses are in the majority.
- iii. The "raped lady" (page viii) symbolizes every oppressed person in society, dehumanized, brutalized, abandoned and made terribly sad.

- iv. The use of numbers (figures) for the prisoners (though normal in the real societal prison setting) assumes a significant symbol in the play which is indicative of the total absence and lack of individuality of existence by the detainees.
- v. The use of names of animals such as Tortoise, Hare, Fox, Antelope, Ekun, Esin, Obo, Erin etc. for the oppressed characters instead of human names symbolizes a serious degeneration of humanity to the level of animals, a kind of gross dehumanization. This further symbolizes, in the general sense, the fact that the masses in Nigeria are maltreated and construed to be animals by the powers that be.
- vi. The total number of the characters in the play is 20 (twenty). 4 (four) of them are the corrupt rulers and or their agents while 16 (sixteen) of the characters are the ruled, the oppressed masses as evident on page xi and other areas of the text. The symbolic implication of this seems to be that only 20% of the nation's citizens are the rulers who oppressively rule the 80% masses who are brutalized and dehumanized by the corrupt and wicked successive governments in the country.
- vii. The prison itself can be taken to symbolize Nigeria which is a "rotten verminous maggoty dump --- dungeon ---hell of a place --- (page 3).
- viii. The protagonist of the play, Gafa, with the prison number 222 and the animal name "Tortoise" (who is also called "G the T") symbolizes the lone voice in the wilderness of national oppression and the symbol of collective struggle of the masses by the masses against oppression in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

While Symbolism has been fairly treated, space constrains us to only briefly mention and exemplify the other literary devices. One of those to be briefly exemplified is the effective and adequate characterization of the play. Each character in the play suits adequately the role assigned him or her by the playwright and contributes effectively to the overall message, intent and purpose of the play. For example, the character and name of the "Emperor" in *The New Dawn* aptly suit and symbolize all oppressors and corrupt rulers and personalities in Nigeria who consider themselves more than normal human beings. Hear the Emperor speak:

Emperor: Shut your trap --- the maker
with whom I rub shoulder presently
in greatness, gave my progeny
a destiny. A divine staff of office.
This divinity which I personify.

There is also impressive use of songs in *Scapegoats and Sacred Cows* as an instrument of satire and demand for a new social order. Such songs are many in the two texts. An example is on page 8:

Agbe gbemi dele o, Agbe

A kiirajo ka ma dele o,
Agbe gbemi dele.

Allusions are also appropriately used by the playwright partly to show the illegally legitimized bribery in the land and reinforce the need for an end to the devilish corruption culture and retrogressive development in the country. Such allusions are historical, religious and contemporaneous. An example is given below of the historical allusion:

Gafa: In Cuba, Fidel Castro pitched battle against
the dictatorship of Batista. He was tried. His reply ---
“History will indicate me”. Where is Batista today?

All: Where is Cuba today?

Ninety-nine per cent of the population of
Cuba can read and write.

Nelson Mandela was in jail for twenty-seven years.

Today, he is myth alive.

He will be a myth at death (*Scapegoats and Sacred Cows*, page 14).

It may also be expedient to say that the playwright uses several figures of speech such as personification, euphemism, hyperbole, simile and metaphor to make the two plays separately and jointly have organic unity in the portrayal of the corruption culture and retrogressive development in Nigeria. For instance, there is the extensive use of similes in *Scapegoats and Sacred Cows* as could be found on pages 5, 7, 12, and 23. On page 7 alone, at least three profound similes could be found. One of them which explains the terrible state of the body and life of the oppressed is stated as follows:

Coarse like the back of a tortoise,
Hard like the soup-pot back of a crab.

The overall effect of the presence and gradual entrenchment of the culture of corruption in Nigeria is evident in the extensively increasing retrogressive development. Nigeria of pre-independence era was a great, strong and giant nation where everything worked, where there was orderliness and sanctity of the human life. It was a country with a strong currency. It was a land where everybody was assured of what to eat a day. It was indeed a nation in motion to the top. But successive governments, especially after about 1979, began to misdirect the ship of state for personal aggrandisement which eventually culminated in quick succession to the serious high corruption level that the nation grapples with today. The playwright had, since the early 1980's, seen the ugly trend and had cried out in print as evident in the two texts under discussion like some other committed writers of his school of thought but his voice in print has not been yielded to by the corrupt and oppressive rulers in Nigeria.

The two texts exemplify the terrible retrogressive conditions that the nation has been subjected to over the years by the “neo-colonialists” in their own land and over their own people and their own blood. Such conditions include poor infrastructure and utilities such as poor roads, poor health institutions and epileptic power supply. There are unwarranted deaths, maiming, killing and kidnapping which have assumed a gory level of “culture of death” (page vii, *The New Dawn*). There is all-pervasive hunger and poverty in the land. The statement of 219 (a character) in *S & S* on page 15 is very instructive of the retrogression in the land:

We can't pay school fees ---
We can't buy food ---
Our cars have parked/packed themselves
On the mortar for life.
We can't pay our flat rents ---

The New Dawn was written in 1982 while *Scapegoats and Sacred Cows* was written in 1990, yet both have very strong current relevance which confirms the playwright as a prophet as well as a visionary writer. If the voice in print of the playwright has been yielded to, we will not be having the terrible retrogressive development in Nigeria which is now evident in the terrible corruption culture with its sub-cultures of kidnapping, assassination, power outage, impunity (page viii of *Scapegoats and Sacred Cows*), lawlessness (ibid,p.13) electoral malpractices, nepotism, human rights violation (ibid, p.vii), scapegoats, preys and predators, inequality, wasted generals (ibid,p.26), rape (ibid,p.vii), repressive laws (ibid,p.41) organized state killings (ibid,p.v) and the general poor state of the economy called Recession. Today, a lot of homes are in disarray due to their inability to make ends meet.

In further relating the content of the two texts to contemporaneous Nigerian situation, the culture of retrogressive development exemplified in the two text is evident in the growing incidence of poverty in Nigeria. The masses daily toil and work, sweating to make ends meet and yet ‘the ends do not meet’. The truck pushers, the wood cutters, the water drawers, the labourers, the taxi drivers and similar workers daily cry of poverty. The rank and file of civil savants, company workers and hordes of pensioners daily bemoan the terrible fate that befalls them. The governments themselves are broke [carelessly or corruptly] and poverty-stricken as they are finding it difficult to fulfill their statutory responsibilities evident in the half-salary [and unpaid salary] syndrome, bad infrastructures, absence of utilities (especially pipe-borne water and disconnection of electricity to government houses and offices.

The effect of retrogressive development culture in Nigeria is very precarious. One major index of retrogressive development culture in Nigeria is the daily weakening of the currency. The currency of a nation symbolizes the nation. Where the currency is strong, the nation is strong. Conversely, where the currency is weak the country can be considered weak. For a substantial long period of time up to 1983,

one dollar (1\$) was not up to one naira (₦1). It was a period of time when a brand new Toyota crown car was being sold at about ₦ 4,200.00. Now, a dollar is about ₦500.00. What captures this scenario is nothing but retrogression and it has steadily been on in Nigeria for some years and has gradually become its culture. The daily weakening of the naira as heightened the culture of retrogression in Nigeria which, again, is further evident, inter alia, in:

- a) daily nose-diving of the national economy;
- b) children school fees are unpaid;
- c) era of parents writing undertakings at school for their children and wards;
- d) parents selling their properties to pay school fees and to feed the families;
- e) era of poverty triggered kidnappings;
- f) era of poverty triggered ritual killings where a whole human being can be bought even with ₦20,000;
- g) large scale prostitution even involving students and working class women and house wives;
- h) regular theft of seemingly insignificant foodstuffs by desperate poor people just to eat for the day;
- i) husbands running away from homes and abandoning their families etc;
- j) growing number of ‘professional’ beggars and;
- k) incessant borrowing by governments to finance annual budgets.

CONCLUSION

It was Chinua Achebe who stated that “Art is, and always was, in the service of man”. No doubt Olu Obafemi has been in the service of his people with the two texts. He has demonstrated that he is a literary guru highly committed to his race and who has used drama to express and openly condemn the terrible level of corruption which has become a retrogressive culture in Nigeria and brought untold hardship to the majority. The overall effect of the cancerous corruption culture is seen in the retrogressive development in the country where things were rosy, safe, enjoyable, reliable, enviable and prosperous in the past as against the present situation which is a reversal of the fortunes and glory of the past. The playwright deftly makes use of varied literary and stylistic devices which have been earlier enumerated. The characters as well as the themes, setting and stylistic devices are all inextricably entwined that one is prone to conclude that the two plays constitute an ideal portrayal of the corruption culture and retrogressive development in Nigeria against which the playwright calls for a change which he believes will ultimately be as affirmed by him on page 46 of *Scapegoats and Sacred Cows* that “the *Scapegoats*, the people whose causes are just and righteous, always win the battle --- against the *Sacred Cows*”.

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