

THE PLAYWRIGHT IN A STATE OF TERROR: A CRITICAL ANALYSES OF TWO SELECTED PLAYS

Kosy Anulika Okafor Ph.D. and Alex C. Asigbo Ph.D.
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

For several years, the problems confronting the nations of the world in general and Nigeria in particular have been reduced to economics, politics, and incessant terrorist attacks. Such plays like Asigbo's – *The Reign of Pascal Amusu*; and Rotimi's *If...* support this claim. However, for the artist to remain relevant in Nigeria's socio-cultural and political environment, the artist must first be relevant to the society, for as long as that society exists. He must change with the times. He must understand and have factual knowledge of his immediate society and most importantly, be in a position to wage war against continuous terrorist activities through his/her creative works. It is in fact the Playwright's sense of duty to think outside the boundaries of acceptable opinion and dare to audaciously say things which no one else would dare to say. This is where the media fails sometimes; recalling the events of 9/11 where the media continually failed in its job to serve as investigator that is charged with the task of thinking outside the box and conscientizing society. Based on this outlook, this research paper seeks to critically examine the role of the Playwright in a State of Terror and discovers that the transcendent nature of theatre as an art, not only shows us the beauty of everyday life, but can also go beyond everyday politics and media publicity to critically address the problems of the day. By way of example, the selected plays reflect the various ways through which the Playwright exposes terrorism and responds to the atrocities of terror in the Nigeria space. In the end, it is the Playwright who triumphs over the conventional wisdom and challenges the reader/spectator to do the same.

Keywords: Counter-terrorism, Nigeria Space, Playwright, State of Terror, Terrorism, Terrorist attacks, Theatre.

Introduction

If one has to describe global events of the 20th century in one word, it would likely be terrorism. This is because in the 20th century, acts of terrorism became more prevalent throughout the world as political, religious, and social activists agitated for change. In all major regions of the world, terrorism is deep rooted as a result of economic recession, collapse of infrastructure, resulting in mass unemployment with its attendant security and social challenges. This has tended to enthrone a Hobbesian state of affairs where might has become right and impunity, the order of the day.

Terrorism is not novel in human history and while government resistance to this dreadful

insurgency has wearied with the passing years, it has become an apt subject for literary discourse. Terrorism is the use of violence with the aim of furthering a political or ideological goal at the expense of the general population. Terrorism may be thought of as interplay between two broad categories of organizations- terror cells (e.g., Al Qaeda, ISIS, ISIL, and Boko Haram) and counter-terrorism agencies in which the playwright stands tall as counter-terrorist agent. It can take many forms and has many causes, often more than one (as Political Terrorism; State Terrorism; Bio-terrorism; Cyber-terrorism; Eco-terrorism, and Nuclear Terrorism). Terrorism is deeply rooted in religious, social, or political conflicts, often when one community is oppressed by another. Thus, the event of

September 11, 2001 provides a justification for waging war against terrorist activities without borders.

Broadly speaking, the acts of terrorism has become more common throughout the world as political, religious, and socio-economic conflicts explain the various forms of deprivation that gave rise to terrorist activities. However, the unlawful use of violence to achieve political and ideological goals at the expense of the general populace has become a problem confronting many African writers and a number of plays written during the 1990s addressed these issues. Due to the realities of the African situation, the African writer cannot afford to sacrifice the urgent needs of sensitizing the populace, through his/her creative works, to the ever emerging myriads of social upheavals prevalent in many African communities. Considering the sad event of 9/11 and besieged by countless socio-cultural and political issues in the Nigerian polity, acts of terrorism pose great challenge to Nigeria's democratic space.

There is no doubt that the problem confronting Nigeria is deeply rooted in governance, political system, leadership and indeed terrorism and counter-terrorism operations. Nigeria for one is a country that is plagued by intrinsic lack of unity and underdevelopment. It is a country that lacks coherent political culture, selfless, and purposeful leadership. These grave national problems have been the concern of many selfless Nigerians. This also gave rise to the generation of playwrights that are not just story tellers but are ever committed to the cause of waging war against terrorism in their creative works. They are the class of writers who have stepped out of the shackles of idealistic storytelling and reversed the tide by breaking the consensus and media propaganda. These classes of playwrights are patriotic in their sense of duty. They speak outside the boundaries and say things that are different from what the establishment, the media,

and the leading intellectual would not dare say. Herein arises the question of patriotism.

Mark Twain in this regard wrote something that was interesting about patriotism in his text- "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court":

My kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country, not to institutions or its officeholders. The country is the real thing, the substantial thing, the eternal thing; it is the thing to watch over, and care for, and be loyal to; institutions are extraneous, they are its mere clothing, and clothing can wear out, become ragged, cease to be comfortable, cease to protect the body from winter, disease and death. To be loyal to rags, to shout for rags, to worship rags, to die for rags- that is a loyalty of unreason, it is pure animal... (64-65).

Twain's idea of loyalty is important in the present discussion, because to criticize the government is the highest point of patriotism. Contrary to the media, disinformation is routinely 'planted' by security operatives in the newsroom of major dailies, magazines and TV channels. Oftentimes, it is only a relatively few well connected correspondents, who provide the scoops, that get the coverage in the relatively few mainstream news sources, where the boundaries of debate are set and the official reality is consecrated for the bottom feeders in the news chain.

However, this is the sad reality of our media houses over national issues. In this regard, the corporate media- although acting independently of the security apparatus intelligence, may be said to be a viable instrument of this evolving oppressive system. Hence, to sustain and facilitate this oppressive agenda through counterpropaganda, these 'fabricated realities', funneled on a day to day basis into the news chain must become indelible truths, which form part of a broad political and media consensus. Consequently, those who go

outside the boundary and criticize official policy are tagged unpatriotic and disloyal by the media. Herein is the daily reminder on hate speeches to Nigerians. Nevertheless, when the media make such accusations against innocent citizens as dissenters; they have forgotten the meaning of loyalty and patriotism. 'Patriotism does not mean support for your government, it means as Mark Twain has said; support for your country' (66)

Just like Mark Twain, this is the concern of many Nigerian writers such as Ola Rotimi, Alex Asigbo, Bakare, Ojo Rasaki, Ahmed Yerima, Tor Iorapuu, among others who in the spirit of counterterrorism are committed in their collective quest towards an egalitarian society. Their idea of egalitarian society and good governance is one inherent in the people, and all free governments are founded by their authority and instituted for their benefit; and that they have at all times an undeniable and inalienable right to alter their form of government in such a manner as they may feel expedient.

There is no doubt that a good number of Nigerian Playwrights depict the crisis of governance, political system, leadership and indeed fellowship and provision of a tenable, viable and enduring alternative system. However, the emerging playwrights are bracing up with the challenges of our immediate time and situation by first addressing the urgency of realities of our existence rather than pursuing a universal theme that is acceptable to the west. Most of these plays, if not overtly political, pass important comments on socio political issues affecting the nation at any point in time.

It is for the same need that inspired these writers that this research paper explores the fundamental issues relevant to the best approaches to counterterrorism and for the corporate existence of Nigeria as a federating nation. This research paper therefore seeks to critically examine the role of playwright in a state of terror. It takes exception to the view that art should be for entertainment only if we have maintained that all arts must be an evaluation

and criticism of the society. As arts center on the plight of man within his environment, writers cannot but take as their subject, such areas as history, politics, terrorism, and counterterrorism strategies to address the issues of the day. These are concerned with the way people have fared over time in the light of communal cohesion and overall well-being. Therefore, through counterterrorism approach many African writers have made fighting terrorism the dominant issues in their creative works.

Bearing this in mind, the concept of terrorism has been brought within the purview of literature because of the artist's quest to affect his society by effecting positive change in his day to day living. It is therefore not enough for the playwright to write just for writing's sake; but to critically examine how the people are being governed and of course seek for an alternative system that will provide a better life for the people.

Terrorism is therefore an apt subject for literary discussion in Nigeria where the practicality of art and social responsibility of the artist are needed urgently. Thus according to Zinn, he said that; "Artists can be sly. They can point to things that take you outside traditional thinking". In the same vein, Zinn (2007) citing Pablo Picasso's words;

Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth. Art moves away from reality and invents something that may be ultimately more accurate about the world than what a photograph can depict (6).

Therefore, the concern of playwrights against terrorism in the Nigerian space is more than suitable for literature; it is a sine qua non of the writer. This is because theatre pushes the boundaries; it often evokes heated conversations, even most times public outrages. In fact, the impact of literary works generates societal change. Thus, Nigeria's theatre bears a

mark of ideological commitment and patriotism. In other words, the playwrights' sense of duty is not only to highlight the problems by way of satire but by providing ways to avoid and solve them.

With that in mind, the study therefore selects; Asigbo's – *The Reign of Pascal Amusu*; and Rotimi's *If...* because of the relevance of their themes to the socio-political, economic, and terrorist violence debate going on now, as a way to contribute to counterterrorism and other forms of vices in the Nigeria's democratic space.

Discussion of the Paradigms.

Alex Asigbo's – *The Reign of Pascal Amusu*

Written in the year 2008, the *Reign of Pascal Amusu* is a gripping drama about the transition from military rule to civil rule in Nigeria. In the play, the playwright evokes the people's consciousness to an awareness of the atrocities of political terrorism in the country. Though the playwright did warn aforetime that the "characters captured in the play remains the playwright's imaginary thoughts and therefore has no semblance whatsoever with the living or dead" (Asigbo 2008: v), one cannot but liken the happenings in the play to familiar historical occurrences in the Nigerian polity. Here, Asigbo captures the vulnerability of the Nigerian polity. It is a sad situation of governance where mayhem and terror are unleashed on the opposition and the ruled respectively. In the lines of Amusu; the character disposes his indignation against the opposition in the following lines;

Amusu: How can they insinuate that I embezzled money meant for the purchase of fuel in this country? I, whose views on corruption are known internationally? God will punish them for me. They will feel my hand as long as I remain the ruler of this country ...those that prove stubborn will receive a visit from Rilwanu. It is not my

fault. Politics is war and in war, all is fair (25-26).

In the above lines, one also gets the impression that it is indeed the same architects of democracy that are the very perpetrators of violence in the political system. Here, 'Rilwanu's visitation entails the use of political terror in silencing and crushing all forms of opposition. This vividly calls to mind, the many accusations against Nigeria's EFCC (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission) and DSS (Department of State Security) as agents of political subjugation. It is in this context that the playwright captures that even political appointments into this system has its roots to terrorism, barbarism and cruelty. The author reveals thus in the ensuing dialogue between Amusu and Odibo and Amusu and Sony respectively;

Amusu: Odibo

Odibo: Yes, my President.

Amusu: Summon Mallam Rilwanu Lulu at once

Odibo: You don't mean to set him on Masi, do you sir?

Amusu: That will be too direct and indiscreet. We'll start with his son and business associates. Tell Rilwanu to lean hard on them. I think that will send home the message of our resolve to him.(20-21)

Between Amusu and Sony;

Amusu: I see. You know these boys from the creeks could have their use after all.

Sony: Exactly my thinking, sir.

Amusu: Send the Presidential jet to Pitakwa immediately. Arrange to have their leader Esuene Wariboko brought here. We need to have a heart to heart with him.

Sony: At once my President.

Amusu: Offer him anything, as long as they step up their terrorism during elections (23).

It is indeed a worrisome issue how these political actors loot the treasury for political gains. This apparently implies that making monetary profit is the overriding force to their political career as depicted in the characters of Amusu, Odibo, and Sony – the evil genius respectively. In the following lines, the playwright describes the ineptitude of some leaders who in the quest for personal gains sacrifices the future generations, even to the 5th generation as a result of reckless lifestyle and incompetence. Thus according to Amusu;

Amusu: In the game of power, there are no rules. Promises are made to be broken. You only keep those that serve to further your interests. Use every means at your disposal to achieve your objective. Morality has no place in politics. If your brother constitutes an obstacle, crush him first and make up later. People can always be bought, so learn how to use the carrot and the stick. Finally, always keep a scapegoat to bear the blame (42).

However, the storyline paints generally the picture of a nation wandering in turbulent waters. Through the use of conversational language and philosophical songs, mingled with indigenous exclamations, Asigbo has echoed that our leaders are selfish, crude and are the very perpetrators of political terrorism as can be seen in the following dialogue by Amusu;

Amusu: You see what I mean? We own this country. In fact, Odibo, for serving me diligently these past years I am going to make you the governor of your

state whether your people like it or not (26).

Herein is the big moral question that continuously challenges Nigeria's democratic space. It is in fact the dire need for power at all cost that has diminished Africa nations and particularly Nigeria in this very deplorable state we found ourselves.

Rotimi's *If...*

Written in the year 1988, the play *If...* is saturated with dark, brooding satire, teen angst, blossoming sexuality, and tales of innocence lost. The main characters are youthful, likeable and naïve (Onyema, Kalade, Ukot, and other Children). While the adult characters in contrast are resolute, unresponsive, stanch, ignorant and almost inhuman in their callousness such as; (Landlord, Papa, Betty, Akpan, Adiagha etc.). *If...* dramatizes a society in the quest for a stable, viable, dynamic, transparent and accountable political structure. Rotimi presents us with a time of critical emergency in the Nigeria polity, which witnesses a disorderly social stratification in the 1979 elections. It is obvious that the kind of political contest in this country is such that is based on political thuggery, violent confrontation between political opponents, and in most cases killing, rioting, bribery, maiming and worst still rigging of election with police approval. Hence, values, dreams and ideals are lost in these political contests and in return violence erupts; it batters on all social and political activities.

Aside from the problem of social stratification and political thuggery, evidence is the unending constant ethnic clash that exists among the characters in the play. It is in this regard that Rotimi reveals that the growing political commitment as a result of the ethnic disputes in Nigeria, finds its root to the issues of political terrorism. Rotimi's major concern in *If...*, revolves around some emasculated or, in his words, 'chosified' individuals in contemporary society. Though reflective of the balkanization of Africa in colonial times, these political actors

have been attributed to exploiting and subjugating the down trodden of the society which is geared towards bringing back erstwhile political and economic violations of the pre-independence era. Here is a play where principles and problems collide, ideas and dreams strike against practicality and expediency. However, according to Rotimi, the only way to get rid of this unjust system is only by a change. And this can only be realized through a social but a political action.

The setting of *If...* involves certain depraved characters in a multi-tenanted building, whose lives the landlord ungraciously threatens with quit notices to secure their votes. In the play, the playwright presents a sordid social reality where all the characters except the Landlord are wrapped up by cancerous poverty. The landlord obviously signifies an oppressive ruler in Nigeria, a nation struggling to make sense of multiplicity in political transition, towards achieving manipulation and exploitation. At the heat of the daily struggles, the masses seem to lose the essence of living and in that regard; the character Papa sees this generation as the wasted.

For decades, the problem confronting Nigeria as a nation has been attributed to bad leadership. Therefore, Rotimi in *If...* captured the true state of Nigeria's polity through the quagmire of an incurable disease (cancer), using the character - Mama to buttress the hopelessness of Nigeria's situation. Like cancer, the issues of bad leadership, unending ethnic disputes and violence, political system and class structure, economic and socio-cultural conflicts, have eaten deeper into the system to the detriment of future generations.

If... is a play which calls for a socialist revolution. Using the play, the author seeks a classless society devoid of exploitation and oppression. It looks forward to an egalitarian society where the national resources are evenly distributed amongst its people. Even the little Onyema envisages this vision. It is in this vein that he (Onyema) criticizes their scoutmaster

who is said to be self-centered and who refuses to help his friend Kalade with the college fee. It is therefore evident in the play that the likes of Scout master's character can be likened to politicians who are only concerned with the accumulation of the nation's resources in the hands of few opportunists.

Rotimi therefore relives the consciousness that the literary artist uses his work as a veritable instrument for the liberation of the masses from all sorts political deprivation and therefore urges the people to hold onto the only weapon that will bring about the desired change which is their vote. According to him, one of the devices through which the 'haves' abuse the 'have nots' is through threat of intimidation meant to emotionally blackmail them into voting these political actors into positions of power. Ola Rotimi therefore conscientizes the reader about the cruelty and barbaric acts of these political actors at the corridors of power and offers that change in the present political system depends on the big IF;

If the masses, the oppressed masses again for a change will use their votes as a tool for their own freedom. If that fails, then mass struggle becomes imperative (16).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been observed that the playwright through the realities of his literary works creates plays which strive to maintain and sustain society at all times. By drawing on the expertise of these selected playwrights as historians, political scientists and counterterrorism agents, this paper promotes transdisciplinary dialogue, recognizing that terrorism is an issue at the intersection of politics, economic, and religion that has profound implications for Nigerian's democratic space. However, the kind of theatre created by the artist should be seen as a catalyst of change, and concretization. Also in the same vein, William Shakespeare's rightfully describes the agents of

terrorism in our contemporary world as the 'architects' of the New World Order; "Hell is empty and the devils are here. Therefore, our indelible task is to send the devils of our time, the

self-proclaimed architect of terrorism down to where they rightfully belong".

Works cited

Asigbo, Alex. *The Reign of Pascal Amusu*. Valid Publishing Company, Awka. 2008.

Bakare, Ojo Rasaki. *This Land Must Sacrifice*. Enugu; New Age Publishers, 1991.

Picasso, Pablo. *Picasso on Art* in "Artists in Times of War". Sophia, A. McClenne and Morello, J.H. (ed.). Vol.9. Issue 1. Purdue University Press. 2007.

Rotimi, Ola. *If...a tragedy of the ruled*. Heinemann Educational Books (Nig.) Ltd., Ibadan, 1986.

Twain, Mark. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. New York: Bantam: 1994.

Zinn, Howard. *Artists in Times of War*. Vol.9, Issue 1, 2007.

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/21>

DO NOT COPY