

POLITICAL JOBBERS AND THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION IN EMEKA NWABUEZE'S *A PARLIAMENT OF VULTURES*

INTRODUCTION

The theatre helps to create vision for society. A good one, according to Arthur Holmberg:

should not only enchant or provoke, it must also educate in the broadest sense of the word. It ought to lead out from the self, broaden perspectives, and enlarge our sympathetic understanding of ourselves and our world (1999: V).

The perennial national question of poor leadership has been taken up by some of our playwrights, albeit during the military dictatorship. Because of the evidence of military mis-rule, there was a general outcry when General Sani Abacha aspired to drop his Khaki uniform and become our civilian head of state. The civil rights groups mobilized themselves against him, feeling that the ultimate challenge and the only road to salvation would be the enthronement of a democratic government. Hence, when Sani Abacha was thrown into Hades by fate, Abdulsalami Abubakar enthroned a hush-hush democracy. Olusegun Obasanjo, a retired general who took over from Abubakar touched the innermost part of us in his inaugural speech. But evidently and unfortunately too, we observe that the politicians themselves, in their phantasmagoria of future happiness, merely want an opportunity to be strong, to have their own kingdom come.

This paper seeks to demonstrate, through a careful study of Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures*, that the national question of poor leadership in Nigeria is an 'Abiku', even in a democracy, since the mental decay of modern man does not permit our politicians to cut the umbilical cord uniting them to the decadent and deracinated mentality of the military of the 20th century.

The Leadership Question

The leadership question in Nigeria is, indeed, the national question, if by national question, we mean the fountain-head of the variegated socio-economic and political problems that appear to make the unity and positive development of our country intractable.

Many scholars have attempted to pinpoint the root-cause of the problems of the black world, and specifically that of Nigeria. To give examples, Nkrumah, Fanon and Rodney, among others, blame our problems on colonialism. C.B. Okolo feels that the real problem with Nigeria is "squandamania mentality", which according to him, "narrows down people's horizon by defining and determining progress, social importance, social values, power, authority etc almost exclusively in terms of material success and achievement" (1994:9). Obaro Ikime on the other hand, opines that "the ethnic problem in Nigeria is, indeed, the National Question around which a great deal of our national life revolves, and in the name of which all sorts of crimes have been perpetrated against the nation" (1987:20). Chinua Achebe rightly argues that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership". To him, "the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, the challenges of personal example, which are the hallmarks of true leadership" (1983:1). Nigeria as Achebe posits, "has been less fortunate in its leadership". This is due to the fact that:

The right concept of power or power as service to the people, for the protection and promotion of their good is little known and rarely practised in Nigeria. Rather, it is often wielded for self and equally against others. Positions of power and authority invariably turn out to be sources of gain, financial security — political leaders — see their time in office as a grand opportunity for over-reaching themselves at the expense of the common man (Okolo, 1994:86).

This writer agrees completely with Achebe that the cause of all the problems that face Nigeria as a nation is a failure of leadership. This is because it is "the leaders who dictate and incarnate values of the society" (Okolo; 1994:88). Good leaders through the incarnation of higher values can eradicate a squandamania mentality and diminish ethnicity. After all, an ethnic group is not necessarily a homogenous entity. As Nnoli posits, "minor linguistic and cultural differences often exist within the group, forming the basis for the delineation of sub-ethnic systems" (1980 :5). This means that even if Nigeria consists of one ethnic group, with bad leadership, the national question will still persist. This is demonstrated by the recent Aguleri – Umuleri crisis and the Ife – Modakeke clashes, among others. On the contrary, the Buhari-Idiagbon regime, a brief one though, is a good example of a situation where, through sincere personal examples, ethnicity, squandamania, indiscipline, corruption and the state of complete

disorder that characterized our second democratic experiment, were completely subdued. Today, if Nigerians are corrupt, they "are corrupt because the system under which they live today makes corruption easy and profitable" (Achebe, 1983:38).

The Theatre and the Leadership Question

According to Bode Osanyin:

The theatre has been described variously as a slice of life, as a mirror of society, as the pulse of society, torch-bearer and so on. If the theatre is to perform its legitimate function, it cannot but be critical (1983:2).

Since the evolution of playwriting, dramatists have continued to pay tremendous critical attention to the timeless human issue of leadership, providing opportunities "for checks and balances" because "where theatre flourishes, there is enlightenment" (Osanyin, 1983:3). Although sometimes, the unalloyed exposition of the excesses of people in authority generates reprisals, committed dramatists usually remain undaunted, not only because of the burning desire to tell the truth, but also because of the understanding that the well-being of the people, to a great extent, depends on the activities of the leaders, who as we have said earlier, incarnate and dictate the values of society. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Brecht, Ngugi and Rotimi, among others, know that if leaders live to satisfy their inner cravings, there will be trouble, even chaos. So, they beam their searchlights on the activities of leaders to ensure that those who control should be above criticism in order to have the moral courage to deal with their subjects when they do wrong.

In Nigeria, the perennial question of leadership has been taken up by dramatists, especially during the military rule. Soyinka, Osofisan, Sowande and Irobi, among others, for example, see the military as simply, an agent of social dysfunction. Their despotic, absolute, and authoritarian tendencies make them adequate material for satirical dramaturgy. This is because, as Olisaemeka Ezeji posits:

The compelling need to assert self and authority, often overshoots the bounds of civility and human dignity — and reduces the despot to an unsettling state very incongruous, yet laughable as a result of the foibles of a psyche gone paranoid (1994:24).

To Soyinka, according to Peace Umendu, "the military misconstrue power to mean the sublimation of democratic principles of power-sharing,

and freedom of opinion, association, and of other fundamental human rights" (1998:15). This is what in *A Play of Giants*, Emperor Kasco implies when he asserts that:

— power comes only with the death of politics. That is why I choose to become an Emperor. I placed myself beyond politics. At the moment of my coronation, I signal to the world that I transcend the intrigues and mundaneness of politics. Now I inhabit only the pure realm of power (P. 21).

Generally, all the playwrights who examined military dictatorship in their works see it as an aberration, a complete negation of professionalism. To Chimaroke Edward:

These playwrights in trying to clarify the political aspiration of the masses, the necessity of democracy replacing dictatorship, depict the military as lacking propriety of conduct — as brutes who through violence, subject the masses to the rule of force in a world where human rights demand that people be ruled by their consent (1999:6).

Political Jobbers and the Leadership Question in Emeka Nwabuee's *A Parliament of Vultures*

Political jobbers here refers to people in authority or position of power who see the government house as the floor of the stock exchange. Their main objective for getting into parliament is simply to partake in the 'sharing' of the national cake. Like Senator Arikpo in Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi*, they go into the Senate not "to make argument for anybody's betterment" (P. 72), but "to graft some skin on the scar — of poverty, "to hang" their portraits on the walls of the Senate" (P. 73).

A Parliament of Vultures, which appeared in the millennium year – 2000, is perhaps, the first published play that examines the vulgar realities, indiscipline and unflattering characters that infest out nascent democracy. In this play, Nwabueze, through his exposition of the activities of legislators, weighs the democrats in the balance of power, and finds them much more vulnerable than the military in their mis-rule and inability to improve the quality of life of the people. In this play, Nwabueze simply argues that the operators of our new democracy, in spite of their cry of democratic dividends, have not moved a step forward politically.

A Synopsis of the Play

In situation one of the play, we are exposed to the sensibility of the lawmakers through the image of Madam Omeaku, a roadside food-hawker, who gains access to parliament through crooked relationships with the moneymen. Here also, we encounter the first paradox in the play. The lawmakers regard education with contempt, but possess a zest for academic titles. For example, Madam Omeaku boasts:

It's more difficult to learn how to survive in the modern society than to obtain a university degree (P.10)

Hence:

I've worked my way into a position of authority without education (P. 10).

In Situation Two, the parliamentarians, through the use of religious theatrics paint a picture similar to that in *Julius Caesar*, where in talking about the need to have Cicero as one of the conspirators, Metellus Cimber argues:

O let us have him,
For his silver hairs will purchase
Us good opinion,
And buy men's voices
To commend our deeds... (Act II Sc I).

In this situation, the fake Reverend Jossy is reminded to wear his sauterne daily. Habamero, the speaker of the House, makes it clear to Rev. Jossy when he says:

Yes you wear it all the time.
That's why we worked your way into parliament.
Your sauterne will lend credibility to our programmes
that was why we worked very hard to see that you are in
parliament (p.13)

The parliament's spending spree starts here with the approval of one million naira for Jossy's Sauterne. This is quickly followed by the approval of N2m inconvenience allowance to every member of the parliament. This is followed by the approval of a brand new Honda car for Miss Nkechi Omeaku as an incentive to use her force of erotic temptation to bring down key opposition members of the parliament.

In Situation Three, Dr. Parkkers and Mr. Otobo, the only people in parliament who speak of decorum and accountability, lament the

conflicting meeting schedules orchestrated by the speaker to exclude them from the meeting. Also, we are treated to a flash back on how Madam Omeaku won the election. Finally, there is a squabble as Mr. Omeaku tells Dr. Parkkers of the love affair between Mr. Brown and his wife, Madam Omeaku.

In Situation Four, we encounter a major upheaval in parliament when Madam Omeaku assaults Dr. Parkkers. Also, Madam Omeaku replaces the secretary who is impeached while he is somewhere possessing a carnal knowledge of her daughter. There is a move to divert education funds and N2.6b is approved for thanksgiving service in Rev. Jossy's ministry. Finally, Dr. Parkkers' objection to the dubious constitution of the Board of parastatals leads to chaos.

In Situation Five, N3.6b is approved as a supplementary budget for the parliament's inaugural party. Dr. Parkkers and Mr. Otobo are arrested on a dubious charge of breaching parliamentary code amounting to felony. This is followed by a presidential press conference to douse rumours of the mismanagement of the national economy.

In Situation Six, Mr. Brown fails to get a fair share of the business deals he brokered with madam Omeaku. Their relationship goes sour. Also, the lawmakers revoke all land allocations made by previous governments, but as they attempt to deal the final blow on the national economy, the anger of the people who have endured great suffering and hardship, is aggravated by the arrest and detention of Dr. Parkkers and his associate, which leads to a militant uprising against parliament.

From the synopsis above, it is clear that *A Parliament of Vultures*, is a bitter satire against the worrisome state of affairs that characterize our nascent democracy. In the play, even with non-payment of workers salaries, and mass unemployment, the parliament, with "sounding ominous notes of carnality" (Holmberg, 1999:15), and religious theatrics, celebrate with fierce determination, the possibilities of amassing the wealth of the nation. As in the play, the new democracy is marked by parliamentary squandamania, intellectual strangulation, political acrimony and recklessness and a systemic entrenchment of poverty through unemployment and non-payment of workers salaries. General insecurity as a result of religious fanaticism, increased rate of armed robbery, ethnic and sub-ethnic clashes, kidnappings, ritual murders and political killings leave everyone in the country gasping for survival, thereby making the much advertised democratic dividends an incantation of the absurd.

The leadership of our new democracy is filled with dirty people, people like Nathaniel Habamero, Madam Omeaku, Mr. Brown and Rev. Jossy in *A Parliament of Vultures*. Their actions and utterances show that they represent themselves, not the people. To make all the money that they can is their slogan. As in the play, once the two arms of our National Assembly were inaugurated, the first thing they did was to give each member N5m as furniture allowance. This amounts to "the brutalization of normal sensibilities" (Soyinka, 1984: VIII), because that money was made out to the legislators against the wishes of the people. And this unashamed financial cruelty is the first signal that the politicians merely criticized the military in order to find an opportunity to rule, a chance to have their own Kingdom come. In *A Parliament of Vultures*, Madam Omeaku boasts:

Now that God has buttered my bread, I'll never allow myself to be poor-again. Not in this world, nor even in the world to come. I'll make enough money to last me two lifetimes (p. 68).

This is the spirit that controls our present politicians and even the past ones. For example, Obafemi Awolowo is quoted by Achebe as saying, "I was going to make myself formidable intellectually, morally invulnerable, to make all the money, that is possible for a man with my brain and brawn" (1983:11).

Talking about the high level of financial indiscipline in this democratic dispensation, Gani Fawehinmi observes:

Obasanjo is the only problem in the sustenance of democracy in the country. A major roadblock whenever he came to power. He said that the main thrust of his administration was the eradication of corruption. (Today) it is only a fool who does not know there is such a high level corruption in the country, and we are being sermonized that we are fighting corruption (2002:22)

Similarly, Alhaji Nuhu Sanusi, the Emir of Dutse, says of the Obasanjo led democracy:

In spite of the anti-corruption crusade of the federal government, corruption and financial recklessness remained the hallmarks of the administration — As such, the federal government has lost the moral courage to punish corrupt public officers (2002:3).

Again, when in *A Parliament of Vultures*, Madam Omeaku insults and mocks her retired teacher-husband, and caricatures a university education, when Dr. Parkkers a former lecturer with a Ph. D in Political

Science, is ridiculed and reminded that parliament is not a place for the practice of political science, and when parliament disregards credentials in the appointment of chairmen of the board of parastatals, Nwabueze simply makes clear the intellectual apathy that characterizes the leadership of our present democracy, who stifles education through poor funding, but possesses a greed for academic titles. In the play, we observe that although teachers are humiliated and a university education appears worthless, and parliament declares its intention to divert education funds, in addition to neglecting Dr. Parkkers' informed lecture on parliamentary procedure, a factory worker, who returns from London and gains access into parliament, is given the title-professor, not only to make their party appear intellectual, but to dwarf Dr. Parkkers' doctorate. Hear Mr. Brown:

Yeah. Prof. Prof. He was a factory worker in London. We asked him to take that title in order to make our party look intellectual. You see, our people are obsessed with titles. He doesn't even have a certificate. After all, we haven't told a lie. We haven't called him professor of anything (pp. 4-5).

This is analogous to Salusi Buhari who claimed to have a degree from the University of Toronto in Canada. Salusi Buhari (the first speaker of the House of Representatives in the present democracy) who was impeached following the disclosure of his dubious act, is a good example of the political greed for academic titles. Also, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) is still battling to ensure that the National Assembly does not pass into law, the obnoxious University Autonomy Bill which President Obasanjo intends to use to stifle the university education in Nigeria.

Furthermore, political acrimony and recklessness which, in the play, lead to verbal abuse, series of assaults, and the eventual arrest and detention of Dr. Parkkers and Mr. Otobo, are analogous to the incessant bids for impeachment, physical fights and squabbles that characterize our National Assembly as well as state Houses of Assembly. The Senate within a year of its inauguration, impeached two Speakers (Enwerem and Okadigbo). The current speaker (Anyim) has just alerted the nation of a subterranean attempt by the President to impeach him. Enugu, Benue and Abia state Houses of Assembly are mere theatres of the absurd. The Enugu State House of Assembly, after ousting not less than three speakers, has finally been split into two, with Governor Nnamani preferring to work with the minority faction. The majority group operating from Abuja has

read an impeachment notice against him. Similarly, the impeachment of President Obasanjo, which Gani Fawehinmi feels is long overdue, has been endorsed by the National Assembly. However, the lawmakers have been now persuaded by Nigerians to drop the idea in the interest of the fledging democracy. Political clashes as a result of inter and intra party agitations have created not less than two factions of especially the ruling party – the PDP in all the states and Abuja, leading to political killings by thugs whom the governors now refer to as ‘teeming supporters’.

Also, as in the play, there is a systematic entrenchment of poverty through the non-payment of salaries and mass unemployment. The allocation of N3.6b in the play for the execution of the parliament’s inaugural party is similar to the waste of public funds on white elephant projects such as allocation of N46b to construct a mere stadium in Abuja. Non-payment of salaries at federal, state and local government levels has caused a great deal of suffering and hardship, leading to the untimely death of retired and serving staff in public service, high rate of armed robbery nation-wide, and corruption. All this, and the return of the 419 syndrome lead Nwabueze in *A Parliament of Vultures*, to posit that the national question of poor leadership is an Abiku, even in the democratic dispensation of 21st century Nigeria. And this leads us to join Sonny Okosun to ask, “which way Nigeria?”

The Visionary Gleam of a Parliament of Vultures

A careful reading and analysis of *A Parliament of Vultures* reveals that Nwabueze does not merely intend his play to be a situation report. Much as he understands that perfect democracy is a will-o the-wisp, he believes that good democracy is not an illusion. He creates two characters – Dr. Parkkers and Mr. Ootobo to demonstrate that there still exist people who if in the majority in parliament, can help to bring about a workable democracy in the country. He believes that such people can be found within the academia and in civil service. He argues that if there is a statutory assurance that people who resign their appointments can still be re-absorbed, should they contest elections and fail, sincere people will be willing to seek elective positions in government. Nwabueze feels that, only when this is possible, can we hope to find sincere people who will replace the political jobbers in our present democracy. This is what in the play, Mr. Ootobo implies when he says:

The demand on public affairs is too harsh. The fear of the unknown is the problem of our public officers, and the bane of political development in this nation. They are required to resign from their jobs before engaging in politics. They are afraid to do it and prefer the devil they know (PP. 21-22).

Dr. Parkkers sums up Nwabueze's vision when he replies:

They could have been allowed to go back to their job if they fail in the elections, as obtains in advanced countries. In that way decent people would have the opportunity to contest (P. 22).

Conclusion

In this study, we have looked at various theories put forward by scholars with reference to the meaning of the term, the national question and agree with Achebe that the failure of leadership in Nigeria is the national question. It is argued that since leaders dictate and embody societal values, good leaders can suppress ethnic prejudice and eradicate corruption and squandamania through sincere example. We maintain that this was the case during the brief rule of General Buhari.

Also, we have shown that theatre has been paying critical attention to the unending question of leadership. We have examined the way Nigerian playwrights view the military in their dramaturgy. We are of the opinion that our dramatists see the military incursion into politics as an aberration and a complete negation of professionalism.

Finally, through the examination of Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures*, we have made a kaleidoscopic survey of our nascent democracy, and have discovered that the operators of the system are merely political jobbers. We maintain that they have not moved a step forward politically, since like their military predecessors, they represent themselves, not the people. We finally concluded the paper by examining the visionary gleam inherent in *A Parliament of Vultures*.

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