

INTERROGATING POLITICAL CORRUPTION IN IFEYINWA UZONDU'S *A CRY FOR JUSTICE*

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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the contexts of pervasive political corruption in contemporary postcolonial Nigerian society as dramatized in Ifeyinwa Uzongdu's play, A Cry for Justice. The critical thrust of the analysis focuses on the underlying thematic concerns, character dynamics, and societal reality unraveled through the momentum of the enactment. Using postcolonial theory as its analytical parameter, the study notes that poor leadership, political corruption, and the perpetuation of neo-colonial mentality are issues responsible for the multifaceted crisis that beset postcolonial societies. The analysis of the play underscores the utility of Nigerian theatre as mirrors against which society could view itself and ameliorate the endemic vices in society and corrupt activities of public officials with the resulting impact on both human and national development. The study concludes that drama could be harnessed to serve as an effective instrument for addressing corrupt practices in the society and thus recommends that drama should be utilized in the way towards fostering moral rectitude, create awareness, encourage national dialogue and promoting collective action towards a more transparent and ethical society.

Keywords: Political corruption, Nigerian literature, Social justice, Government, Democracy.

Introduction

The problem of political corruption, an endemic phenomenon that continues to plague societies across the world for centuries, continues to captivate scholars, writers, policy makers, and the ethical citizenry. It is a pernicious affliction that erodes trust in government institutions, undermines the principles of democracy, and perpetuates social injustices. Akaenyi states that: "The trend in corrupt practices by public office holders, most especially in many parts of Africa and Nigeria as a nation has seriously hampered the efforts of international bodies, the governmental and non-governmental agencies towards national development" (10).

It is despairing to observe that postcolonial African is yet grappling with multifaceted socio-political and developmental crisis several decades after independence. David Udoiwang and Chinenye Amonyeze assert that in most of African states, "The developmental process... has been noticeably marred by the phenomenon of negative ethnic consciousness, monster of corruption, neo-colonial dependency tendencies, leadership brigandage and wrangling of succession and violent power struggles" (p.160). In Nigeria, corruption manifests in various forms, such as abuse of power, fraudulent manipulation of facts and figures, nepotism, embezzlement, financial misappropriations, ghost worker syndrome, the 10% syndrome and

a host of other malfeasance both at public and private domains. During the military regimes, notably the Babangida and Abacha eras, corruption began to be institutionalized, and the social system was marked by excessive and wasteful spending without tangible developmental outcomes. Ogbeyi (2012) notes that “If anything, corruption reached an alarming rate and became institutionalized during Babangida’s regime. Leaders found guilty by tribunals under the Murtala Mohammed and Mohammadu Buhari regimes found their way back to public life and recovered their seized properties” (p.9). the situation has not really significantly changed, but has continued to deteriorate. The detrimental impact of corruption extends across administrative, political, economic, and social spheres, hindering the development process. Indeed, corruption remains endemic and key contributor to poverty in most of African states and responsible for decadent socio-cultural system (Ogbeyi 2012, p.3). Corruption not only impedes economic growth but also exacerbates inequalities and inhibits the ability to address citizens’ needs. It distorts economic and social development by fostering competition in sharp practices in the public service sphere. The resulting consequences include a widening gap between the rich and the poor, deepening poverty as a few individuals amass wealth at the expense of the majority, and such situation adds to trigger what Udoinwang and Akpan refer to as “social hysteria” (185) with the complexities that come from situations. Ifeyinwa Uzundu’s *A Cry for Justice* delves into the ramifications of corrupt practices among public servants while shedding light on its implications for national development. The play explores the repercussions of bad governance stemming from high levels of corruption among leaders.

This study aims to analyze the artistic strategy by why the author magnifies corrupt practices in this play, scrutinizing the implications for national development. The goal is to reassess the role of politicians in the nation's developmental crisis as a means of seeking ways to address and curb corruption in the pursuit of national progress and sustainable development.

Drama and Politics in Nigeria

Drama and politics in Nigeria are intertwined in a complex and dynamic relationship. Theater, as a means of artistic expression, has been a powerful tool for commenting on, critiquing, and engaging with political issues in Nigeria. Osita Ezenwanebe (2005) avers that “From its inception, Nigerian theatre is deeply committed to issues of immediate social relevance- from the issues of cultural contamination and degradation to those of moral and social decadence including the inhuman oppression of one class by another (p. 403).

The intersection of drama and politics in Nigeria has deep historical roots. During the colonial era, Nigerian playwrights and dramatists have been using theater as a platform to challenge colonial rule and advocate self-determination and independence. According to Yetunde Akorede (2006):

The first generation of contemporary dramatists among whom are J.P Clark Bekederemo and Wole Soyinka were motivated by their nationalist consciousness to reflect on the situation in the country. This made them to discuss in their plays problems peculiar to the post-independent Nigerian society. They showed their concern for the fate of the Nigerian nation. In *Madmen and Specialists*, he dramatizes the influence of the Nigerian civil war on the society and on the individual. *The Raft* reflects Clark Bekederemo’s concern for the fate of the Nigerian nation as it drifts along the course of uncertainty (p.55)

These writers therefore, present the big social and political issues in their plays. Some of these plays include Wole Soyinka's *Dance of the Forests*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *Death and the King's Horseman*; Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *A Restless Run of the Locusts*, and *Farewell to Babylon*; Kole Omotoso's *The Curse and Shadows in the Horizon*, to mention but a few. These Nigerian playwrights incorporate political themes into their works, often depicting the harsh realities of colonial rule. In his play, *A Dance of the forests*, written for Nigeria's independence celebrations, Soyinka explores the conflicts between tradition and modernity, as well as the challenges facing a newly independent nation. It incorporates Yoruba mythology and symbols to convey its message. Furthermore, in *Death and the King's Horseman* the playwright displays a powerful play that critiques the impact of colonialism on African societies, particularly through the story of Elesin Oba and his community. The play serves as a poignant exploration of the clash between traditional Yoruba values and the encroachment of colonial influence. In *Kongi's Harvest*, he explores the post-independence challenges faced by African nations. The narrative revolves around a dictator, Kongi, and his attempts to control the people and resources of a fictional African country. It serves as a commentary on power struggles and the consequences of authoritarian rule in the postcolonial era.

The political themes in these plays had been intended to inform and educate the public about the detrimental effects of colonization on Nigerian society. Udoinwang and Tsaaior (2023) aptly capture the aspirations, agony, hopes, and the later disillusionment that characterized national liberation struggles and thereafter. Therefore, Nigerian Theatre, right from inception captures the spirit of chaos in the post-independent African nations. Observing the aptness with which Nigerian theatre captures the political situation in the country, Akinwale (1993) notes that "Nigerian theatre was always alive to its responsibilities as far as the nation's political issues were concerned. It condemned policies that were obnoxious to the people and praised those policies that were popular with the people" (p.12). David Udoinwang and Monica Udoette in their article state that "the artist reputedly holds the mirror of society through which the world reflects back at itself" (p.218). This affirms Ngugiwa Thiongo (1981) statement that "...a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works must reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society (p.13). In a similar vein, Ngugi believes that all artists, all writers are in politics" because literature cannot escape from the structures that shape our everyday life. Ngugi's position merely reinforces the traditional perception of the artist in African societies, which Wole Soyinka (1977) re-affirms when he says that "the artist has always functioned as the interpreter and the conscience of his society" (p.32). Soyinka, in fact insisted that the relevance of the artist in the milieu is measured by how actually he mirrors the reality of his society and points out the way forward to higher ideals and more humane alternatives. So, whether as traditionalist, modernists, conservatives, radicals, reactionaries or revolutionaries, artists are in politics.

These Nigerian writers fill the yawning gap for a combative theatre that could confront the ruling class and unmask their knaveries, particularly in their dealings with the ruled. Achebe (1981) emphasizes the importance of art to serve as a reflection of the society. In his book, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, he says that "An African creative writer, who tries to avoid the social and political issues of contemporary Africa, will end up being completely irrelevant like

the absurd man in the proverb, who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames (p.54) These writers therefore present the big social and political issues in their plays. In Africa, since time, just as in modern African drama, satire has remained a powerful tool for social criticism. Theatre was a powerful medium for mobilizing public opinion and galvanizing support for the nationalist movement. These plays were performed in various locations, including schools, community centers, and even on the streets, to reach a wide audience. Notable Nigerian writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Herbert Ogunde were instrumental in the promotion of anti-colonial themes through their plays. Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, for example, symbolically addressed the complexities of post-independence Nigeria. Despite censorship and harassment by colonial authorities, Nigerian playwrights remained committed to their cause. They adapted their tactics to continue advocating for independence, even in the face of oppression. The legacy of Nigerian playwrights' contributions to the struggle for independence lives on. Their works continue to be celebrated and studied for their historical significance and their role in shaping the national consciousness. Satire is a common feature in Nigerian political drama. Playwrights use humor and wit to critique political figures, systems, and societal norms. Satirical plays aim to provoke thought and challenge the status quo.

Nigerian theatre often serves as a form of social commentary. It has been instrumental in highlighting issues such as corruption, ethnic and religious tensions, human rights abuses, and the challenges of democratic governance. The Nigerian government has, at times, responded to politically charged plays with censorship, bans, and arrests of playwrights. This demonstrates the potential threat that political theatre poses to the status quo. In summary, drama and socio-political history in Nigeria are deeply intertwined. Theatre serves as a powerful medium for reflecting, critiquing, and engaging with political issues in the country. It has a rich history and continues to be a vital force in shaping public discourse, advocating for change, and commenting on the political landscape in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory is a valuable theoretical framework for exploring socio-political and historical encounters in African states. The background to this theory informs the analytic undercurrent of Uzundu's *A Cry for Justice* because it allows one to examine how the legacy of colonialism and neocolonialism influences political corruption in the play. Postcolonial theory is a multidisciplinary intellectual framework that emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Postcolonialism serves as a prominent element in African and Caribbean literature, with writers in these regions perceiving colonialism as a tool intended to diminish their significance. A noteworthy aspect of postcolonial criticism lies in its endeavor not just to highlight the anomalies of colonialism but also to explore and discuss how independent nations shape their identities even in the aftermath of colonial rule. According to Oparah (2020):

The people have a lot of expectations from their leaders after gaining independence but are disappointed at the exploitative nature of their leaders who are very corrupt, self-centered and greedy. Their main aim is to acquire wealth thereby complying with the get-rich-quick syndrome, without considering the poor citizens who are eager to feed and survive. But the people not only suffer. What about the environment? (p. 129)

Postcolonial theory delves into the historical processes of imperialism and colonization, exploring how dominant powers established control, exploited resources, and imposed their cultural norms on colonized peoples. Homi Bhabha, Bill Aschroft, et al, Elleke Boehmer and others have done many inquiries into postcolonial thinking in literary works. Postcolonial theorists investigate how colonialism influenced and manipulated the identities and representations of colonized individuals and communities. This includes the imposition of Eurocentric world views, languages, and cultural norms. African playwrights such as Ngugiwa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Emeka Nwabueze, Zulu Sofola, Ama Ata Aidoo, Sefi Atta, Olu Olagoke, and others use their works to raise awareness among the masses and leaders, urging them to combat corruption—a pervasive issue that has entangled societies and even affected future generations. Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* stand as notable examples of post-colonial novels that vividly expose the corruption prevalent in African society. It is against this backdrop that this study delves into the thematic and social contexts of Uzondu's *A cry for Justice*, shedding light on various levels of corruption represented in the text.

Corruption and Political Struggle in Uzondu's *A Cry for Justice*

When the socio-historical backdrop to the dialogues and actions in the play is perused, the facts would begin to unfold how the play is not only the means for interrogating character of the nationhood pictured in the play, but also the struggle for power and a vivid reflection of the corrupt practices of Nigerian politicians who are fictionalized through the characterization of the play. The story is centered on Chief Uzodinma, the main protagonist of the play, who has been nominated as the King Elect of the Umuolembe village and the consequent struggle for his dethronement by Mazi Odi. Mazi Odi is one of the kingmakers in the community and he considers Chief Uzodinma as being unworthy of ruling over Umuolembe because of his poor financial standing. Mazi Odi sets out to muster the cooperation of Chief Omereoha, who refuses to be part of his wicked plans, but Mazi Odi threatens to expose his dirty secrets if he refuses to cooperate. *A Cry for Justice* is one of the numerous plays that reflect the Nigerian political situation.

The play opens with the village town-crier summoning the entire Umuolembe village for an important meeting at Ekeukwu market square. Chief Uzodinma, the King Elect, who presides over the meeting, makes it known to the people of Umuolembe community that they have now been liberated from the marginalization of Ndiulo, a neighboring community and has finally been granted an autonomy. As such, Umuolembe community needs a king. As it stands, Chief Uzodinma is the only one fit to wear the royal crown, having fought single-handedly for the autonomy of his community. Uzodinma is chosen as the king due to his honesty and strong opposition to the marginalization tendencies of Ndiulo community. Mazi Odi expresses dissatisfaction with this development as he strongly maintains that a person's financial stability is a more suitable criterion for selecting a king. From Mazi Odi's perspective, Chief Uzodinma does not possess the necessary financial stability and, therefore, should not be appointed as a king. Therefore, he embarks on a treacherous journey, plotting with the kingmakers on how to bring Chief Uzodinma to disrepute. Mazi Odi says:

Nothing is too late, my friend. I refused to tell anyone because I was surprised at people's inability to see the spots on the skin of the leopard. Again, I knew he was the only one that could bring the autonomy, so I decided to wait and strike at the right time at the right time, which is now. Let me tell you; fighting for

autonomy in disguise can never be an automatic passport to mount the virgin throne of Umuolemgbe. Never! (p.16).

Uzonde's play is an effective indictment of corrupt Nigerian politicians whose bad influence he become the bane of under-development in Africa. The visit of Mr. Mazi Odi to Mr. Nwakanma's home reveals the antics of corrupt politicians in winning in an election. He even goes further to convince Mr. Nwakanma that Chief Uzodinma's quest for power is borne out of his selfish desires to enrich himself at the expense of the villagers. Mazi Odi says:

Mazi Odi: But what? Okay, If you think Uzodinma's intention for this community is genuine, now tell me: throughout his stay in the north, how often did he visit home? How many times did he present palm wine and meat to his kinsmen? Because he was doomed by the civil war, he now wants to feast on Umuolemgbe to greatness. I don't know why educated people like you are not able to decode Uzodinma's antics. Over my dead body will a poor man like Uzodinma be my Eze (Pp.18-19).

With the above, it may look as if Mazi Odi is truly committed to the plight of the villagers to an uncritical mind, but his action is actually borne out of his innate desire to actualize his lifelong ambition of getting a political post and enjoying the luxuries that life can offer as a powerful politician. He states the following:

Mazi Odi: Let us have audience with Eze Umuokorobia first, his reactions will take us to the next level (Pats his back). Don't worry, we will succeed. We must elect an Eze that can afford to offer us red wine, white wine and blended whisky. We are tired of our local dry gin and palm wine. You know that variety is the spice of life, eeh! (laughs) We need onye Eze that can afford to treat us with varieties of sumptuous meals on any visit to the palace. We must aim high so that we can enjoy what other communities are enjoying (p.23).

Mazi Odi is a character who learns in a typical Machiavellian way that 'the end justifies the means' which explains why he uses the instruments of blackmail to consistently get whatever he wants. He threatens to expose the amorous affair between Chief Omereoha and his niece if he fails to cooperate with him by recovering the documents of the community, which are in the custody of Chief Uzodinma. Mazi Odi says: "And where is the conscience and honor of a man who slept with and impregnated his niece? Eh! Chief Omereoha my foot! (p.44). In a bid to protect his image, Chief Omereoha is not left with a choice rather than to do his bidding. Chief Omereoha succeeds in recovering the documents in the possession of Chief Uzodinma. For Mazi Odi, political power is viewed not primarily as a tool for promoting good governance but rather as avenue for achieving economic empowerment. The playwright buttresses the fact that the so-called politicians are not only lacking in moral integrity, but are administratively incompetent to effectively manage the nation's affairs to pilot the affairs of the nation. Mazi Odi's arrogance and greed can be seen against the manner and style in which he withdraws his support for Chief Uzodinma's emergence as the King elect, so that Nwakibeya, the notorious drug baron will climb the seat of power. Here, the playwright is directly saying that the greedy habits of these leaders, their extravagant display of ill-gotten wealth, and their indifference to the suffering of the masses has pushed promising youths into criminality.

The playwright depicts Mazi Odi as a character, devoid of significant moral principles, compelled to commit acts of violence against fellow humans. In the play, she portrays a society suffering under the control of its true adversaries, including rulers, leaders, opinion influencers, and advisers, symbolized by figures like Mazi Odi. Mazi Odi is portrayed as a politician, who is responsible for instilling negative beliefs and mobilizing the youth to resort to violence as a means of confronting various forms of social injustice. His statement below is pointing:

Mazi Odi: Yes I know, but there are two things a man cannot resist; the first is a woman, and the second money. Eze Umuokorobia has no job since ten years he left the university. Going by his age, he is ripe enough for marriage and has eyes on Ugonma, my sister-in-law I will set a trap for him with her, while you use your money to cage him. He will surely collapse like a pack of cards (*Laughs mischievously*) (p. 22)

Mazi Odi employs money as a tool to influence the youths, thus highlighting the extent of poverty prevalence among unemployed young individuals in Nigerian society. This reflects their inclination to prioritize immediate gains, making them easily susceptible to manipulation. The dramatist simply cautions about an imminent catastrophe that looms over a society characterized by a strong inclination toward corrupt and greedy behavior. The playwright firmly contends that a thriving democracy is unattainable in a country where political leaders, who should ideally champion moral and social causes, are morally bankrupt. She advocates exposure and ridiculing of corrupt individuals, asserting that such people are unfit to hold positions of authority. They should therefore be exposed, shamed and in that way, Nigeria will become socially more integrated. The political leaders in the enactment are seen to exhibit total indifference to the inhumanity in society. Mazi Odi has no cogent reason for withdrawing his support for Chief Uzodinma as the king elect except for greed, show of power and a wish to arrogate to himself power for controlling others and amassing wealth.

The playwright is aware of the need to punish the political misfits in the society. The writer criticizes vices such as the inefficiency of the political leaders, corruption in the system and also the apathy and indifference of those who succumb to it because they are beneficiaries of the rot and are living well. Uzodu exposes some of the politicians as culprits who readily conform to the exploitation and oppression of the less privileged ones in society. In order to buttress the need for purposeful leadership, the playwright introduces the character of Chief Uzodinma, a man known for his qualities of integrity, compassion, courage, and a sincere dedication to societal progress.

Despite being unjustly cheated and deceived by corrupt politicians, Uzodinma displays remarkable resilience, unwavering truthfulness, unflinching bravery, and a steadfast commitment to his community. Through Chief Uzodinma's character, the playwright underscores the significance of opposing social injustices and emphasizes the need for leaders who prioritize the welfare of their community over personal interests. The eventual coronation of Chief Uzodinma as the king of Umuolembe community, upon the arrest and detention of Nwakibeya signifies the triumph of good over evil. The play portrays a society that is profoundly troubled by issues of political corruption and is calling for a change in government to ensure that corrupt politicians are held responsible for their actions. On the day of Nwakibeya's coronation as the King's elect, Chief Uzodinma refuses to partake in the

ceremony. Uzodimma's refusal to attend the ceremony is a smart step indeed. This serves as another crucial lesson that many self-proclaimed reformers should grasp: it is wiser to abstain from participating in a corrupt system rather than contributing to its disorder. Thus, he laments to Anyanwu thus: "No my friend; I will stay indoors and cry for Umuolemgbé. I will stay in my house and cry for justice. How do you expect me to be part of the ceremony that I have placed a curse on?" (p.80).

The coronation ceremony gets interrupted with the arrival of policemen who brought up so many charges, including drug-related offence against Nwakibeya and he is subsequently arrested. The playwright aims for the society to draw lessons from Nwakibeya's sudden arrest, a drug lord, and the repercussions faced by the likes of Mazi Odi. Chief Omereoha mobilizes the youths, who mercilessly beat up the political misfits in the community such as Mazi Odi, Nwakamma and Ugochukwu. Here, the writer is unequivocal in stressing the fact that corruption will persist unless those who are oppressed stand up to confront the existing order, seizing control to free themselves from the inhumane treatment they endure. Until such a proactive stance is taken, genuine change will remain an elusive prospect. Nwakibeya's unexpected apprehension and imprisonment symbolizes the concept of retributive justice, also known as nemesis. These politicians, previously involved in greedy and corrupt activities in the socio-political sphere feel immune to consequences until they are eventually caught up in them.

The play suggests that Nigerian politicians are largely corrupt due to their individual greed and avarice. Nevertheless, the playwright condemns this corrupt practice and calls for its eradication for the betterment of society. The root cause of societal corruption is identified as greed, pride, and ostentation, which have driven the characters to amass wealth unlawfully and live extravagantly. The playwright bares the reasons behind the extravagant and flamboyant lifestyles of Nigerian leaders, as being rooted in greed and financial recklessness. The writer firmly believes that this behavior must be curbed. Additionally, the playwright points out that the impatience, lack of contentment, and greed of the youth have driven some to engage in criminal activities such as drug trafficking, armed robbery, cybercrime, kidnapping, and ritual money. The character of Nwakibeya, a young man who ends up arrested alongside other drug traffickers, serve as an example of the consequences of such behavior. The playwright uses Nwakibeya to reinforce the theme of nemesis in the play, which suggests that every evil action has repercussions to the culprit with ripple effects on the larger society.

Conclusion

It is evident in the play that the theatre can be used as a tool to prod out the various strains of corrupt politicking in the society by questioning the status quo and preaching change and proffering solutions. Moreover, the dramatist makes a powerful observation about how the insatiable greed of political figures has brought impoverishment to the community. Poor leadership has drained resources through embezzlement, misappropriation of funds, and redirecting finances meant for societal progress into personal aggrandizement. Consequently, this has led to poverty, deprivation, and joblessness in the society, while the culprits continue to revel in wealth and self-gratification. Sadly, their actions have coerced innocent young individuals into a life of crime as a means to survive and compensate for the void created by the self-centered opulence of these covetous political leaders. This study concludes that

corruption which is an offshoot of bad politicking has maimed society drastically, especially as exemplified in Nigerian society. The writer also draws the attention of the readers that corruption will not stop, until the oppressed rise up to challenge the status quo, thereby taking the bull by the horns to liberate themselves from the inhumane treatment they are subjugated to, and until then, positive change will only be a mirage.

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