MANIFESTATIONS OF NIGERIA'S NATIONAL EXPERIENCES IN CHRIS NWAMUO'S *THE PRISONERS*

By

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Iyorza, Stanislaus. (2009). "Manifestations of Nigeria's National Experiences in Chris Nwamuo's*The Prisoners*."Eds. EsekongAndrew and Babson Ajibade.*The Dramaturgy of Liberation and Survival; Festschrift Essays on Chris Nwamuo's Scholarship.*Calabar: University Press.Pp 92 – 98. (ISBN: 978-007-172-5).

Introduction

In Nigeria, if the effects of development policies were felt by every Nigerian citizen, the search for respite would have assumed committed and prompt dimensions. Common hindrances to social development seem to be inflation, corruption, embezzlement, extreme ethnicity, selfishness and man's inhumanity to man. Nigeria has suffered exploitation in two phases: first in the colonial era, and second, during the post-colonial era, in which the nation is struggling against the forces of independent colonialism by its own people.

Nigerians have approached their struggles in various dimensions. Their criticisms have been registered freely in newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Yet, nothing has changed. Many have suffered different shades of attacks and embarrassment in the course of protest, while a few are doing it intellectually through some literary means. Chris Nwamuo, a Theatre Arts Administrator, a teacher, a playwright and a play director falls within this category. He has offered his voice as a cry for the underdogs of this society and has exhibited this attribute in several of his plays, one of which is *The Prisoners.*

The play makes the author a "Marxist" in some way. The theory of class struggle forms the basis of modern socialism pioneered by Karl Mark, Friedrich Engels, as well as the conservative advocate of social reform, Lorenz Von Stein (Killian and Turner 279). The theory of class struggle, encapsulated in class-consciousness in its restricted sense,

incorporates as a central feature, the burning conviction that members of a class suffer from a shared state of injustice. In the Marxian analysis, class-consciousness has always been understood as a political consciousness of one's own rational class interests and their opposition to the interest of other classes. Thus for class consciousness, there must be:

(1) A rational awareness and identification with one's own class interests

(2) An awareness of and rejection of other class interest as illegitimate; and

(3) An awareness of and a readiness to use collective political means to the collective political end of realizing ones interests (Mills 325).

Nwamuo's*The Prisoners* is a celebration of class-consciousness, exploitation of the masses, corruption and embezzlement of funds, by public officers and a hope for the masses to take their rightful place in the Nigerian society. The exploited masses are therefore "the prisoners" or "the captives", held in bondage and deprived the right to good living in the nation. The riotous acts of the four prisoners are mere expressions of discontentment over their standard of living. While these acts are capable of yielding positive results as it did during the Bolshevik Revolution on October 14, 1917 in Russia, such efforts have not yet been fully exploited to the end. However, the individual scenes in the text are reflections of many occurrences in Nigeria and it is the playwright's agitation and expression in writing about the possibility that one day the common man would employ revolutionary means to emancipate himself from the bondage of hunger and exploitation of the big cows of his society. *The Prisoner* is therefore Nwamuo's contribution to nation-building.

The Plot

The play opens in a field behind Corporal Bako's house with four prisoners who have been sentenced to jail with hard labour. They are guilty of running away from the war front and raping girls who refused to be conscripted into the militia. It is about 3pm and three of the prisoners are busy cutting grass under the heat of the sun, while the fourth produces music

to which rhythm the cutlasses respond. The prisoners are already complaining bitterly about the inhumane acts meted on them. They question the rationale behind the superintendent, sergeant and the corporal's decision to deny them food "when the store is filled up with stockfish, yams, rice, beans, garri... and various other food stuffs'[1] (Nwamuo 6). The impoverished state of the prisoners compels them to ask questions. And, at this point, there is an expression of disappointment over the fact that the perpetrators of their ordeal are "our own brothers who plan our death before the bullets even reach us".

It becomes obvious that the prison officers prefer to distribute the supplies amongst themselves, making, it more difficult for the prisoners to survive. This arouses class-consciousness. The need to plan a take-over was initiated, yet the process underwent the acid test of the righteous Mezie. Difficult as it is, the plan is evolved first to steal food from the stores of the officer in charge and second to take over leadership from the superintendent and his officers. At last Mezie, the born-again prisoner sees reasons with Obi, Onwu and Buchi, the other prisoners. He joins them in the plan to over throw the prison officials. Their predicament is likened to George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which "all animals are equal but some are more equal than others".

As the prison officials plan how to exploit supplies meant for 75 new prisoners, the takeover plan is hatched and the prison officials are arrested against their expectation, along with the Superintendent's girlfriend, Stella. The rebellion climaxes the play and the prisoners metamorphose into different beings now assuming new roles and personalities in order to experience life. They change into the prison official uniforms and begin to punish the prison officials in the same manner that they were dealt with. The play unravels philosophically with the Superintendent's assertion that both the prison officials and the prisoners are all prisoners of one system or the other, struggling for the freedom of the oppressed.

Characterization and Symbolisms

The superintendent of prisons in Nwamuo's*The Prisoners* represents the political gurus, godfathers, ministers, governors and chairmen in Nigeria. These are characters that are saddled with the duties of piloting the affairs of the nation and ensuring that resources are equally distributed. The wealthy in Nigeria are superindents by virtue of the fact that they oversee and run the affairs of the country and enrich themselves. They are known for inflating of expenditures and vouchers, and pretending to be acquiring and allocating money for infrastructural development and other human needs for the good of poor citizens. They share a larger portion of the nation's wealth among themselves at the' expense of projects for the benefit of the masses and favour those who remain faithful to their dubious deeds.

These superintendents become emotionally unsteady at every attempt to uncover their exploits. They are known for keeping sex mates and spending much on them. They live that others may die. They call the poor "rubbish of the earth". Nnedu, the prison sergeant, represents the informants, the personal secretaries or 'Personal Assistants' to political office holders in Nigeria. They have no powers to take decisions like their masters; they take instructions and execute them. They also eat from the crumbs that fall from their masters' table and partake in the corrupt practices and exploitation of those who are imprisoned by their greedy masters'.

The four prisoners represent the oppressed Nigerians who are struggling for independence from the hands of the oppressors. They are the poor masses who are the victims of political "war". But some have come to find themselves in such state as a result of stealing and immorality. The prisoners themselves have taken to reasoning that would enable them to survive. Obi discovers that their inability to commence a struggle against the authorities is even a war against themselves, not the enemy. He sounds rhetorical: "why must our own brothers plan our death before the bullets even reach us? Why must we starve in the midst of plenty? Mezie is however portrayed as a character with religious attributes. He represents the

suffering masses that delight in religion, remaining steadfast to so-called religious virtues despite the level of suffering they encounter. These masses live on the hope that one day "it shall be well". This same character represents the backsliders, who have suffered depression for long, and who have lived with the hope that soon, the affairs of the world would turn to favour them. But then, they have run out of patience amidst temptations of struggling on their own. To survive, they no longer wait on God. Obi specifically tells Mezie "manna can no longer fall from heaven, you cannot praise God on an empty stomach".

Reflections of Nigeria's National Experience

Literature is generally viewed as a reflection of society. Apart from reflecting the society, literature informs, entertains and also educates, yet the predictions inherent in literature are quite unnoticed. Critics of Nwamuo's*The Prisoners* view the play as limited to a specific incidence in Igbo land in Nigeria.

A critic, who sampled the views of students, reflected that the playwright had chosen his characters from only among the Igbos and does not make the play a reflection of Nigeria as a whole. But the playwright feels otherwise about the student's views, claiming that, since he drew the experience from his environment in the then war region, the characters had to be Igbos (Udo 4). One should not forget in a hurry that the aim of art is not to produce a photographic replica of some individual reality, but rather to reveal *what* is universal and essential in the art with everything accidentally subordinated as far as possible (Fergusson 27). It is therefore necessary to state here that Nwamuo's*The Prisoners* does not only represent certain occurrences in specific geographical area, but reflects a general phenomena, first, anywhere in the world where the masses are oppressed, and second, in Nigeria where oppression of the masses has been a common event, and from where the playwright directly draws his inspiration.

Although, Nwamuo's play is more advocative and presentational than representational, certain happenings in the political experience of Nigeria are evidently reflected. *The Prisoners* revolutionary acts are a match to activities of the early nationalists in Nigeria and their protest against the colonial rule. The colonial masters were exploiting the resources of the land while the Nigerians who laboured for them had little left. The resources were rather exported to Europe for the development of the European economy, which irritated Nigerians as well as other African states and motivated them to revolt vehemently against the colonial masters likened to the superintendents of prisons in Nwamuo's*The Prisoners.* The prison officers, the sergeant and the corporal, are the district officers, through whom the colonial masters ruled. They too had some share of the exploits. The struggle for independence in Nigeria is vividly reflected at the end of Nwamuo's play where the prisoners strategically planned and took over their masters.

The mention of "war" in the play reflects the Nigerian civil war too, the "prisoners" representing the prisoners of war (POW) who ran away from the struggle for the attainment of a sovereign state of Biafra. They were actually arrested, imprisoned and oppressed but their struggle to over power or over throw their "master[1] is uncertain. Yet, the same "war" represents the daily fight of Nigerians for survival. The superintendents of prisons and the prison's sergeant and corporal are the upper class, the rich, the bourgeoisies, the industrialists, the capitalist and the politicians in Nigeria. They are wealthy and are known for embezzling funds provided by foreign agencies for the development of public infrastructures for the well-being of the struggling masses. They delight in carrying women for pleasure. A good example is the life style of Nigeria's late military dictator, General Sani Abacha, who allegedly died in revelry with women.

Conclusion

Chris Nwamuo's*The Prisoners* is a play that, according to critics, emphasizes those aspects of the war, which still exists with the society to this day such as problems of good leadership, inequality and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. *The Prisoners* reflects some occurrences in Nigeria as a nation. It has reflected these events and has solicited for a revolution, which is predicted to have power change hands in the country. What is however clear is that revolution is not easy to achieve. For, the Nigerian bourgeoisies (who are the oppressors) are well positioned to avert revolutions that are capable of overthrowing them. Their assistants do not relent in the process of protecting the interest of their masters provided they are benefiting from the government officials.

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