

METAPHORIZED IMAGES AND MATERIALISM IN NIGERIAN DRAMA: ZULU

SOFOLA'S *WIZARD OF LAW* IN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Sofola's comedy, *Wizard of Law* examines the materialistic attitude of the Nigerian society and addresses conflicting social values of ethics and existentialist logic of scam. Her prophetic play written in the 1970s, when the ethical value collapse hadn't become fully apparent, parallels the current realities of the Nigerian society. The noted tentacles of corruption which has spread over all areas of civil society is analysed wittily in the script to reveal the transcendental element of money in Nigeria's social ladder. The play's characters are crafted as existentialist organisms indulging in moral vandalism just to survive the poverty monster. The writer condemns worldly women marrying for quick gains, greedy traders exploiting customers for sharp profit, covetous lawyers and the complicit Nigeria judicial system while stressing on the need for moral reassessment. Sofola's *Wizard of Law* employs flat characters primarily serving the purpose of didactics, uses local language, speech posers and deductive paradoxes of outright deceit to worsen the already chaotic verbal Nigerian environment. The article significantly examines moralist imperatives and the evolving social standard of ethics.

KEYWORDS: Existentialism, Fraud, Materialism, Morality, Social Reality

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian scams or what is known in Nigerian parlance as '419,' after the penal code describing the crime, consist of various online dating scams soliciting victims with the catch phrases: 'you're the chosen one', 'an offer you can't refuse', 'your long lost relative' etc. These distasteful emails originate from fraudulent characters claiming to be Nigerian or African princes, barristers, bankers, relatives of famous political figures, government officials, businessmen etc.,. The storylines of these creatively concocted missives are ridiculous and incredulous to discerning readers but for greedy vulnerable victims offer an easy opportunity to make money and in reality get swindled. There's much similarity between this contemporary materialistic misnomer and the prophetic theme of Zulu Sofola's 1970s drama, *Wizard of Law*, an adaptation of the anonymous medieval French farce, *La Farce de Maître Pierre Pathelin*,

Zulu Sofola's adaptation, *Wizard of Law* examines the materialist attitude of the Nigerian society, especially lawyers' ready attitude to subvert justice for selfish ends. Sofola's dramaturge explores Nigeria's social ambience to investigate and address the conflicting social values and identical constructs founded on the identified stereotypical models in the corrupt value chain. Regarded as one of the most notable Nigerian playwrights, Zulu Sofola wrote many plays which addressed the cultural values of her native Delta origin with themes extending across gender inequality, crime, love materialism etc. Ani describes her as "a reactionary writer who reacts to issues in her society" (155). Her satirical approach is lucid in examining issues of political complacency and corruption. Concerned with problems of social discrimination, Sofola plies a moderate brand of feminism which albeit its non confrontational style stresses the assessment of a human's

worth based on an individual's intrinsic qualities and not gender attributes. Her works generally stress mutual respect among genders focusing especially on the need for women to defer to their husbands and be worthy home makers.

When Zulu Sofola, one of Nigeria's foremost dramatists, wrote her comedy, *Wizard of Law*, in the 70s it was mostly taken by readers for a good laugh since materialism and its attendant moral debacle was yet in its infancy. The farcical premise of the play at that time seemed at variance with the Nigerian society which still retained healthy social values and an equitable independent legal system. The ethical cases of class inequality and exploitation of the poor class by the elite weren't rampant and hadn't reached such advanced proportions currently evident in different facets of the Nigerian society. Sofola's prophetic script has become validated in contemporary materialist Nigerian society where corruption and poor leadership have become regular news items. Sofola's depiction of lawyers as scam artists who lie and cheat to achieve their selfish ends should be taken with a pinch of salt as this logic has pervaded the mentality of Nigerian masses who perceive them as exploiters of poor clients at their mercy. Zulu Sofola, as a keen observer of her society, utilizes her literature at the operational level to tie events to concrete models in the reader's mind. Her portrayal of the dramatic characters' mentality and motivation imbues the dramatic enactment, in this instance a farcical sort, with reinforcing cultural values. This stereotype, which derives from the assumptions and convictions about the members of a social group, can be sometimes explicit in the perception of attitudes and grounded social values behind certain actions. Sandra Moriarty and Nancy Mitchell observe that: a stereotype is a representation of a cultural group that emphasizes a trait or group of traits that may or may not communicate an accurate representation of the group. Sometimes, the stereotype is useful and aids communication by using easily understood symbolic meaning but sometimes the stereotype relies on a characteristic that is negative or exaggerated (177).

Drama is a powerful character identity agent which examines how individuals fit into social roles. Nigeria, as a country copiously aspiring after western models of social value, has consistently become materialistic and evolved this culture to extreme ends with all the social classes participating. In most Nigerian literature, the authorial concern with corruption and moral decadence has become most visible. Virtually every Nigerian dramatist from Wole Soyinka to Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Ola Rotimi, Ahmed Yerima etc have variously brought their critical pens to bear on the perplexing issue. In the real society, market women readily exploit the naïve buyer; transporters readily hike fares and cheat their passengers while the clergy concentrate more on the material aspect of their ministry with its attendant wealth instead of spiritual upliftment and moral shoring.

In Sofola's *Wizard of Law*, Sikira marries lawyer Ramoni under the erroneous impression that he is affluent; a notion soon dispelled when his endless promises of 'good times ahead' dry up as empty declarations. Faced with the stark reality of a life in eternal penury Sikira badgers her husband, Ramoni, who resorts to more futile lofty pledges until through providence he encounters Rafiu, a textile trader. Rafiu's greedy intention to profit exponentially from his sale of velveteen lace is upended by Ramoni who successfully defrauds him of the ten yards of velveteen lace on the promise of deferred payment. Rafiu's consequent efforts to recover his money are frustrated by lawyer Ramoni's wily caprices and he leaves Ramoni's house at his wit's end. Meanwhile Akpan, Rafiu's goat-keeper approaches Ramoni to defend him in court against Rafiu's larceny charge and Ramoni comes up with the brilliant legal argument of transforming Akpan into a goat owing to Rafiu's maltreatment. Rafiu upon sighting Ramoni in the court as Akpan's defense counsel is befuddled; a bewilderment extenuated by Akpan's transformed condition of a bleating goat bereft of coherent speech. Akpan wins the court case but when lawyer Ramoni demands his solicitor's fees he is paid in his own coin by the bleating Akpan. Akpan's

image as a member of the lower class resorting to ignoble tricks for existential purposes best captures the moral crisis facing the ordinary Nigerian struggling to tackle material issues.

Wizard of Law presents the Nigerian society and family unit in its naked state. The overt need to show off at social functions and maintain the façade of well being seems to buttress and elongate the argument that the Nigerian society is one where all efforts are made, including deceitful ones, to maintain a misleading appearance of affluence. Sikira's erstwhile hostile attitude to her husband is reversed upon Ramoni's return with the velveteen lace obtained from Rafiu to make matching dresses for the couple for the impending Ileya festival. Sikira's imprudent consideration of Ramoni converts into a positive mode as he becomes 'the best husband in the world'. Ramoni's declaration that he obtained the clothing illicitly from Rafiu doesn't raise any smoralist antenna in Sikira as she becomes an active collaborator to deter Rafiu from reclaiming his possession. Sikira's character raises questions about the moral fiber of Nigerian wives' interpretation of support for one's spouse in the face of crime and the proper implication of that statement. Set in the Ibadan slums, Western Nigeria, the dramatis personae appear as existentialist strugglers resorting to moral vandalism in their bid to survive the poverty cycle. *Wizard of Law* focuses on the never ending succession of fraudulent schemes and corruption in the Nigerian society. Through the character of the protagonist, Ramoni Alao, the writer vents critical angst at corrupt lawyers in a covetous society manipulating a negligent judicial system. Sofola stresses the need for moral reassessment on the part of everyone in authority whether it's the legal sector represented by Ramoni or the commercial sector depicted by Rafiu. Akpan's victory at the end of the play suggests that the poor man who wizens up to the system can beat it at its own game.

LINGUISTIC EUGENESIS

The Nigerian society is a materialist stricken nation and Zulu Sofola's simple, graceful language captures this quality. Her thorough understanding of the lower class, their struggle and thought pattern is greatly utilized in her depiction of dramatic action with imagery easily translatable to her readers and audience. The characterization is minimal and effortless with clear cut stereotypes reflexive of their social class or environment. As Romanus Muoneke explains, "writers are uniquely prominent in society, for among other reasons they have the capacity to offer unique perspectives. That is they are capable of rendering order, or, in recording events in chaos, to give a semblance of understanding" (11). Sofola's play uses direct language to locate its threnodic rhythm on the axis of binary opposition where good counters bad and deceit as exemplified by Ramoni's successful hoodwinking act against Rafiu is returned by a consequent material loss of Akpan's consultation fees. Rafiu's introduction at the beginning of the play then doesn't only serve as a comic auxiliary to the central action of the play but is corollary to the play's sublime message: the dehumanization of a goat keeper or the ordinary Nigerian and his eventual escape from the wiles of a crafty lawyer or exploitative establishment. Rafiu's episode with Ramoni accentuates the poetic justice aim of the play which also highlights the greedy penchant of the Nigerian trader to maximize gains especially at the hands of a big man. This tendency is similarly noticeable on the part of the Nigerian lawyer, Ramoni and the playwright appears to be identifying the two parties as parasitic allies exploiting the corrupt fabric of the Nigerian society.

Dapo Adelugba notes that "...the central figure, Ramoni Alao, the lawyer, can rise to appropriate levels of eloquence in English in court but he, like the other characters of the drama, uses this hybrid language when addressing his illiterate wife..."(776) Since knowledge is created and generated by social circumstance, poor citizens like Akpan with their backs against the wall flail against their oppressors with the only defensive weapon appropriate for their society:

'deceit' especially the linguistic sort. Akpan's bleating as a goat is not to be taken lightly because indeed the poor man in the Nigerian society has been reduced to brutish levels and must play the inhuman card to gain the compassion of the bench: an exclusive concession of the elite class. Akpan's linguistic impasse advances the theory of eugenesis which avers biological superiority, in this case between the intellectual and material elite and the poorer class and as such the poor man must respond defensively with the available weapon. Akpan is a moving target for exploiters like Rafiu and Ramoni and must like the proverbial quarry learn to adjust its flight pattern to escape the skilled marksman.

Sofola's *Wizard of Law* employs local language and speech nuances involving speech posers, deductive paradoxes and outright deceit to worsen the already chaotic verbal environment. Her script plays on the established stereotype of lawyers as repositories of mesmerizing logic and grammatical confounders who exploit the law ass to exonerate culpable clients. In this manner Sofola passes a red card on the Nigerian judicial system while converting laughter to excoriate the perverse fiscal structure of the Nigerian society. The play uses native language freely with added impetus from informal English known locally as 'pidgin English' to achieve the absurdist and satiric aims of the play and create laughter concurrently. This articulate use of language colors the characters and illuminates their environmental milieu. Ramoni's use of confounding vocabulary makes a commentary on the perplexing language of the elite while Akpan's inept grasp of the language complicates his condition further. Rafiu's frustrated speech at the end of the play compounds his plea for restitution.

Ramoni's appearance in court as Akpan's defense lawyer aggravates Rafiu's sense of frustration at his loss. Rafiu's stuttering speech which emanates from his incredulity at the impending miscarriage of justice in public glare is provoked further by Akpan's bleated response to posed questions. Rafiu fails to enlighten the hapless judge who quickly dismisses his suit and commits Rafiu to a sanatorium. Though the playwright deliberately avoids detailing the Judge's profile, it is obvious that the type of Nigerian judge Sofola lampoons is the sort that negates detailed attention to legal cases before them and rules only on approved panjandruns and successful prevaricative legal norms. Akpan's bleated response upon Ramoni's request for his legal fees at the play's close shows how quickly the common man can adopt the linguistic scam for his own existential purposes.

The playwright litters Ramoni's speech with grammar lacking linguistic fitting grace. This appurtenance creates a picture that lawyers are not really as educated as presumed but utilize rudimentary language which serves them in court to hoodwink their hapless clients. Another impression of Ramoni's error strewn speech is that hunger and poverty has affected his clear grasp of speech and made him unprofessional. His inverted logic is appropriated by the playwright to enlarge the social perception of lawyers as mischief makers desperate to achieve aggrandizement without moral scruple. The play's satirical examination of remorseless lawyers, worldly women marrying for quick gains and greedy traders exploiting customers for sharp profit, questions the conscience of the Nigerian society. Though written in the 70s it is important to restate that these noted social malfeasances hadn't manifested to the present epical proportions in which a rich man can marry a well educated lady if he is wealthy even when evidently he doesn't have a visible occupation. Sofola exposes Nigerians' materialist proclivities by locating the play's climax in the court-room and advancing the logical fallacy that Akpan, has been turned into a goat due to his employer's cruelty. This aspect of the argument echoes the shabby treatment of the Nigerian workforce by the corrupt central government which never attends to workers' complaints unless there's a strike action: the only language the government understands. The farce is satirical in parts by illuminating an incongruous corrupt system that dehumanizes and converts people to existentialist boors.

MYTH AND PROPAGANDA

The *Online Free Dictionary* defines myth as “a popular belief or story that has become associated with a person, institution, or occurrence, especially one considered to illustrate a cultural ideal” (n.p.). Materialism as a cultural myth in Nigeria can be viewed from the purview of wealth for health, a notion that wealth obtained through any means would advance one's social well being and standing. This overt attention to one's social standing is what invariably leads most individuals who indulge in corrupt practices to play the game. Ramoni's acquisition of velveteen lace for the Ileye festival is for the primary purpose of presenting an affluent picture of his family and perpetuating the myth of prosperous lawyer in his community. The uniform to be made from the ill gotten textile is desired to present a united front whereas all is not rosy for both Ramoni and Sikira owing to Ramoni's poor financial state.

The myth that only the rich exploit the poor is debunked in the play in scenes where the materially poor exploit fellow poor citizens. This cannibalistic attitude challenges the myth of ‘chop make I chop’ and replaces it with the ‘dog eat dog’ mentality. The play doesn't ply the usual fare of domestic comedy but tends towards socio-political satire. The inherent identity confusion extends the plot of the play but in the same swoop also reduces the subliminal reach of the drama. In characterization, the role reversal, whereby the intelligent lawyer becomes the victim cuckolded at the end by a seemingly dim witted goatherd, adds to the play's ludicrous plot. Propaganda sometimes involves a selective application of truth, half-truths or misrepresentation of facts.

Reflecting on the origin of materialist Nigeria in his article: ‘Nigeria: the Disastrous Consequences of a Materialistic Culture: a Critical Note to the Sovereign National Conference’, Emmanuel Esiemokhai observes that “the materialist culture gained ascendancy during military rule, when those, who occupied military/civilian offices treated the treasuries of Nigeria, as military booties” (n.p.). In consideration of the outrageous cases of lucre in the Nigerian society, Sofola's *Wizard of Law* discloses the transcendent nature of money in the moral pyramid of the Nigerian society. Ramoni's materialism is not isolated in the Nigerian reality but reflexive of the debilitating effect of the cankerworm of worldly acquisition and sick social parameters for assessing self worth and determining position in society. Nigerians go to lengths to buy cars they can ill afford nor maintain and build sprawling mansions with over ten bedrooms when they just have three family members to occupy those spacious rooms. Most of these behaviors derive from the desire to enhance the individual's social status and image. Wealth is readily idolized and inverted as a value system which reflects the social health of the owner; a propaganda that perpetuates the myth of wealth for health with its attendant ego tripping.

CONCLUSIONS

In his *Vanguard Newspaper* article captioned: ‘Bigmanism in Nigeria’, Femi Aribisala states that:

Bigmanism is a chronic national malaise in Nigeria. It is a disease whereby members of a highly visible segment of society are paraded as higher breeds beyond the pale of the law. These big-men flout all conventions and they break all the rules. In Nigeria, bigmanism is the key that opens all doors. You are either a big man or you are not. If you are, the world is your oyster. If you are not, you are the scum of the earth. In order to protect your rights, you will need to secure the good offices of a big-man (n.p.)

The ‘bigman’ phenomenon is not just a self seeking economic attainment of status but a psychological construct pandering to the shallow complex to show off. It is an incendiary which sacrifices morality and ethical values on the altar of status attainment. Sofola's prophecy in the 70s of imminent ethical value collapse has come to reality in contemporary

times. The malfeasance of corruption which has spread its tentacles to all areas of civil society and co-opted the judiciary in playing out its macabre script needs to be addressed squarely by the government beyond lip service.

Ramoni's unconvincing handling of his occupational lingo is a normalcy these days amongst Nigerian lawyers. The ruling elite has not played good role models and the National Orientation Agency, far from marketing proper social values only engages in vituperative brawls with so called 'enemies of state'. It is on record that while news broke globally about the most recent air mishap involving the coffin of the late governor of Ondo State, South West Nigeria and other twenty person's, the national television station NTA fiddled, showing ram fights while CNN, BBC, ALJAZEERA, CHANNELS TV and other international media ran live coverage of the event. Such insensitive attitude purporting to deny the people of information in the name of protecting sensitive information actually negates patriotism which is a requisite tool to counter the effect of materialism. An individual's love for his country will invariably lead to his consideration of his poor neighbor in the scheme of things and enhance ethical responsibility in the society. This mutual assurance of existence reduces the struggle for status in the society and consequent strive for materialist means to achieve these selfish aims. The common Nigerian should refrain from the blind addiction to the materialist cookie.

Sofola's moral statement is predicated on the assumption that if society shapes the individual, a society floundering on materialist corrupt values will imprint negatively on its citizen. The need for social valence in Nigeria need not be overstressed. The incomprehensible culture of material wealth and its avowed importance to Nigerians to the point of venerating money in churches and law courts is a matter of concern not only for moralists but psychologists, care givers and economists. There is need for individuals in authority positions to take a reality check and realign their moral attitudes to social issues of justice, equity and welfare for the lower class.

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