

Strike Action as a Form of Social Protest in Tunde Fatunde's *No More Oil Boom*Utsu Fidelis Ushundebe¹ and Josephat Adoga Odey²¹Department of Arts Education²Department of English and Literary Studies

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Abstract

This paper on "Strike Action as a Form of Social Protest in Tunde Fatunde's *No More Oil Boom*" adeptly interrogates the heightened decadence in Nigeria's post-colony. If Fatunde is compared with his contemporaries like Chris Nwamuo, Bode Sowande, Femi Osofisan, and Tess Onwueme. It is observed that Fatunde's *No More Oil Boom* has not received enough critical attention. Fatunde's dramaturgy is a picturesque testament to a failed Nigerian society that was once believed to be the pride of Africa but has degenerated into a jungle. This is occasioned by inept and bad leadership, bigotry and corruption. This paper is an exploration of the revolutionary tempers in Fatunde's *No More Oil Boom* using workers' strike action as a panacea for registering contempt against a debased and rotten system. The researcher adopts Marxism as the basic theoretical framework for analyzing the play under study. This theory is chosen because it accentuates the artistic vision of the playwright as implicated in his plays. This paper finds out that the emancipation of the working class is the work of the working class itself. Dramatic techniques like the conversational style of discourse, witticism and sarcasm are employed by the dramatist for proper examination and illumination. This paper concludes that Fatunde's *No More Oil Boom* radiates with revolutionary action against the tight-fisted grip of the ruling class.

Keywords: Strike action; Social protest; Privileged few; Down-trodden; Marxism

Introduction

The protest drama and the drama of social commitment are traceable to folk drama through the plays of James Ene Henshaw and other early modern Nigerian playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, John Pepper-Clark Bekederemo and Ola Rotimi. From the mid-seventies and early eighties, that tradition was sustained and taken to a radical level by a younger generation of playwrights who began to respond more directly to socio-political and economic contradictions. These playwrights are set apart from their predecessors by their temperament and vision of drama as a weapon to end the conflicts and contradictions in society. Among this generation of playwrights are Kole Omotosho, Bode Sowande, Ahmed Yerimah, Femi Osofisan, Wole Ogunyeme, Chris Nwamuo, Tess Onwueme and Tunde Fatunde. Fatunde is a committed playwright with a lot of potential and promises. His social vision is apt as enunciated in his plays. In all his plays, Fatunde puts the suffering masses at the centre of the discourse while castigating the few privileged oppressors.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the Marxist theory of art as its interpretative paradigm. The Marxist criticism holds that since literature is the creation of man, then literature should explore issues in society. Furthermore, the theory holds that any piece of art should identify with the realities in the society on which it is based. Marxist critics stress literature that is

committed to the course of the less privileged and downtrodden who comprise the working class in society. Thus, the theory is favourably disposed to artworks that are relevant and functional to society. Marxist critics interpret the realities in society, conflicts and social contradictions from socio-political and economic perspectives. In support of this approach, Charles Nnolim asserts that as our "writers move closer and closer to what we call 'social art'" - art that contemplates society – we expect art that is propagandist, art that tends towards proletarian concern and inheritably art that has Marxist overtures". (*The Critic of Africa Literature ...* 33). Marxist scholars think that the work of art must reflect the human condition no matter how bitter and uncomfortable such a condition may appear to be in the face of society.

Marxist critics are of the view that since society is dynamic, literature must truly reflect the contradictions arising from the unjust social relations in society. Fredrick Jameson in his *Marxism and Form* asserts that "it is, therefore, the very structure of historical materialism, the doctrine of the unity of thinking and action or of the determination of thought which is irreducible to pure reason or of contemplation" (16). Jameson's statement above corroborates Lukacs' position on the purpose of recreating reality in the work of art in this manner:

To provide a picture of reality in which the contradiction between appearance and reality, the particular and general, the immediate and conceptual, etc, is so resolved that the two converge into spontaneous integrity in the direct impression of the work of art and provide a sense of inseparable integrity(34).

Buttressing the idea of the relevance of literature in a stratified society, Terry Eagleton asserts that the literary work is virtually engaged with the living situation of men and women. It is concrete rather than abstract, displays life in its variousness, and rejects barren conceptual enquiry for the feel and taste of what it is to be alive (196). Perhaps, it is in giving depth to the views of Eagleton above that John Peck and Martin Coyle explain that:

Marxist critics have often revealed a reverence for the arts, feeling that through liberation, the writer can stand apart and see the fault of society. The method of much traditional Marxist criticisms has been to reconstruct a view of the past from historical evidence and to demonstrate how accurate a particular text is in its representation and understanding of social reality (176)

The implication of the opinion above is that Marxist critics see themselves as social commentators on the socioeconomic and political circumstances of a society. Because Marxist critics are often dissatisfied with the status quo, they also advocate for a people's revolution to free society from the strangulation of capitalism. Marxist criticism will enable the researcher to appreciate how Tunde Fatunde has employed the Marxist paradigm of thought to x-ray and artistically represent the socio-political and economic situation of the Nigerian state and also project a proletarian vision. This proletarian vision constitutes the subversion of bourgeois hegemony and an institution of a political alternative that is worker-oriented.

Synopsis of the play

No More Oil Boom captures succinctly the gross ineptitude and moral rottenness of the Nigerian leaders. The official corruption, inefficiency and near-total collapse of public institutions as a result of visionless leadership in the face of abundance. The play employs a contrasting group of individuals; the corrupt, greedy, visionless and conscientious, poor and starving whose survival depends on what drops down to the floor from the tables of this affluent group and the leftover that is always a guest in the dustbins.

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Tunde Fatunde as a post-oil boom playwright uses his dramaturgy to interrogate the mindset of Nigerians after the discovery of crude oil in the country and the collapse of hopes and aspirations as a result of visionless leadership, mismanagement of public trust and calls

for change. He sees capitalism as a variant of imperialism which has an inherent mechanism that encourages corruption and exploitation. Thus, the thrust of his play is change – the total obliteration of capitalism and the enthronement of socialism.

In *No More Oil Boom*, the playwright expresses in vehement terms the corruption, greed, short-sightedness and gross consumer culture of the privileged few and the injustice suffered by the poor and majority during the second Republic in Alhaji Shehu Shagari's regime. This period witnessed the institutionalization of official corruption in government business by way of kickbacks or ten per cent of the contract sum. A period that witnessed the 'demise' of democracy and the birth of 'contractocracy.' The government was reduced to contract awards and gratification based on man-know-man.

The playwright presents two contrasting groups of people, the rich and privileged few, the different categories of people involved, and the less privileged majority. The play captures the suffering, lack, hunger, humiliation, exploitation and deprivation of poor workers, in this case, workers who work for an oil company owned by an American, Mr Brown Kennedy. Thus, the oil company, American Florida Oil Company, becomes a microcosm of the Nigerian nation. The plight of the workers symbolically becomes the plight of the Nigerian workers. Despite the abundance of natural resources and the revenue accruing from this, yet poverty and lack starve the majority of the populace on their faces. These workers work tirelessly and committedly to produce oil which the country daily exports but are denied their entitlements and salaries when due. The irony of the situation is that the company's director, Mr Brown Kennedy works in league with some prominent indigenes as he treats them to regular pay packages at the expense of these workers. The workers must not continue in this state of affairs and one of them advised:

Imoudu: No; everybody stays where you are. This is our country. We aren't in Racist Africa. Workers are reassured by Imoudu's speech. They calm down and listen attentively to Imoudu. Moreover, why pretend to hurry back to work when we have not been paid our salaries for the past five months? (*No More... 47*).

The above resolution by comrade Imoudu to caution his co-workers to lay down tools even when the break time is over shows the building up of protest action that is needed to question the status quo. The workers are no longer docile and subservient.

From the beginning of atmosphere one to three we see the moral degeneracy, cooperate consumerism, gross corruption and self-indicting utterances of the oppressors. These practices push working-class people to the level of debtors. They cannot afford their rent. They live in constant harassment from the landlords and the consequence of this is that if no action is instituted, they will be rendered homeless and reduced to wanderers and human scavengers in a society they all laboured to build. To compound their woes, members of the Rent tribunals are agents of the corrupt system. Collective action is therefore needed by the workers to protest against these injustices. Comrade Imoudu's comment illuminates this view.

Imoudu: The members of the Rent Tribunal are all landlords. We don't want to waste our time any longer. Let us organize ourselves. It is now an open battle. It is now a war between those who have more than enough to eat and those who have nothing to eat (*No More Oil Boom... 47*).

This collective self-awareness and the need to violently confront the oppressive class is the necessary tonic the workers must rely upon to bring about the desired transformation. Writing on the gross abuse of privileges and institutionalized corruption which has become the bane of Nigerian politics and its leaders, Otete –Akpofure states that

No More Oil Boom by Tunde Fatunde unveils the sorry states of corrupt evil practices by our politicians who will stop at nothing to get their pockets

loaded, with little or no effort, at the expense of the suffering and deprived masses (249)

Fatunde is not happy with the monumental suffering of the masses. He employs sharps and picturesque imagery, making conscious efforts to highlight the seemingly intractable plight of the poor, and the insensitivity and lack of a sense of direction on the part of the leaders, while the people are dying of hunger, the privileged and the ruling class ironically bask in suffocating affluence, deep corruption and senseless waste. The playwright deliberately dramatizes these conflicting issues and contradictory situations to steer the potent revolutionary consciousness in these suffering people and those sympathetic to their course. Festus Iyayi in his foreword to *No More Oil Boom* gives us a succinct representation of the cataclysmic situation in Nigerian society when he asserts that

... from the anger of the oppressed people emanates all collective consciousness among the Nigerian working class that only a better and sustained class struggle can end the barbarism, brutality, repression, betrayal and inhumanity of our neo-colonial dependent capitalist society (259)

Iyayi's assertion above presupposes that the masses see collective action as a panacea to ending the strangulating antics of the political oligarchs. Okoh Goddey in a review of *No More Oil Boom* writes that:

No More Oil Boom is a revelation of the evils which characterized that oil age in Nigeria; evils which are still very endemic in the mainstream of our national life... because as money went into people's heads during the booms, respect for everything sacred was lost (4)

Goddey's observation above is apt because the play is a realistic recreation of one of the eras in Nigerian history where a surplus of money accruing from the sale of crude oil caused financial recklessness and flamboyant fiscal policies.

Imoudu and Hassam, the leaders of the petroleum and palm oil workers union, are imbued with all the necessary potential that make them union leaders. Right from the beginning, they are presented as literate, brave, courageous and conscious trade unionists. Comrades who are dissatisfied with the conditions of existence workers find themselves and their voices. They do not hide their anger as they went uninvited to the king's palace, the venue where a traditional chieftaincy title is to be bestowed on Mr Brown Kennedy and interrupted the ceremony. The playwright did not keep his audience waiting for too long to understand his condemnation and contempt for a system that is devalued and derided as a result of greed. This direct approach and confrontation by the two major characters help to enhance the protest theme of the play. The workers' protest march to the Oba's palace shows the determination, zeal, optimism and positive wisdom the workers have to change their pathetic situation even in the face of the violent Mobile Police Force. This points to Fatunde's belief that class solidarity and the courageous workers fighting for a new social order are where redemption lies. The heroes in the play are picked from working-class people and this is one of the tenets of Marxist criticism.

Dramatic Technique

Language is the vehicle, through which humans share experiences, thoughts, feelings and emotions. Creative writers capitalize on the indispensable nature of language to the human race to explore issues of topicality. To achieve this aim, they adopt different styles to communicate their intentions. One observes that in the play under study, Fatunde employs various language codes that ignite the sensibilities of the oppressed and dehumanized masses to take revolutionary objectives against any form of injustice. As a self-professed Marxist, the playwright employs simple diction to appeal to and mobilize the masses against the betrayal and hypocrisy of the leaders.

Fatunde achieves a great deal of simplicity in his language which makes for easy understanding. This is a great asset for a theatre that is specifically designed to mobilize

people for social action. Of note too is the conversational style of narration which helps to enhance the witticism and satire in his dramaturgy. Through this technique, the characters' utterances become relevant giving one of the corruption and moral inadequacy of the leaders as captured in the play. Furthermore, the playwright employs disguised references to well-known social and political figures who are connected to the collapse of the oil boom era which has placed the country in this quagmire. Finally, Fatunde carefully delineates his characters to symbolize the social class they belong to. Through this dramatic technique, the characters are categorized into the oppressors and the oppressed.

Conclusion

Fatunde's drama has much social relevance not just because of the social and economic issues it raises but because of his empathy and sympathy for his audience. The string of attachments existing between the playwright and his audience is evident and imposing. He aims in his dramas to sensitize his audience to the need to take their destinies into their own hands by protesting against the unjust and unfair system.

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