

**THE DRAMATIST'S SOCIAL VISION AND THE QUEST FOR A BETTER SOCIETY: A
CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF AGORO'S *SOMETHING TO DIE FOR*****Dr. Kenneth Efakponana Eni****Doubara Otiotio****ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses itself to the select text based on the social critical art theory. Utilising the theoretical discussion on social criticism, the writers examine the ways in which the select play serves as a challenge to existing traditional practices. The writers use the select text as base for looking at the effectiveness of drama as a critical tool in society and how this tool has been used by the playwright in deconstructing and reconstructing his society. The writers conclude by asserting that cashing in on the Christian concept of love, the playwright presents varying perspectives on reconstructing his society based on his vision of mutual reconciliation and recognition of social-identities to outright overthrow of old systems.

Keywords: Drama, Dramatic Criticism, Literature, Social Criticism, Theatre, Drama and Society

Introduction

The centre of interest of study in the humanities is humanity itself. So every effort is made at drawing values which are beneficial to man and society in humanistic studies. Drama being but a branch of this vast area of human scholarly efforts will be the least not to be concerned with efforts at creating a better and balanced world for the artist to dwell and pursue his art as well as help create a suitable environment where all mankind can live together in harmony. The artist being a humane person cannot but pass comment on his society's failings and inefficiencies or willful derailment from societal ideals. This is where the social critic comes in. Drama by its recourse to the representation of human action in conflict with the aid of characterization aided by the visual effect before an audience, which is a microcosm of the society, becomes a mirror, in

which the society can now examine itself. It has done so quite well since its existence and has proven not to be a friend of despot and societal misfits. Therefore, it is the intention of this essay to examine the select text in order to bring to fore the values of the work to society and to highlight through the example of the work how drama has sought to better society through social criticism.

Dramatists of all ages have tried to criticize their society. Nigerian and other African dramatists have also tried to use the dramatic medium to express their dissatisfaction with the state of the continent, especially the Nigerian nation and despotic African leaders in their bid to clean their society of elements or images which they consider not good for the general well-being of man and what they consider as factors retarding the development of the African states. In the play chosen for the study, Agoro uses the Nigerian society as a platform for preaching his gospel of a morally clean society, lashing out at those he consider as undesirable. It is the intention of this essay to examine the select work with a view to determining how effective the playwright has employed the medium of drama as a corrective tool and how effective drama is as a critical medium aimed towards correction of ills in the society for a people's rejuvenation.

About the Playwright

S.N.A. Agoro is a professor of Dramatic Literature in Theatre Arts and the current Head of Department of Fine, Industrial and Theatre Arts Niger Delta University, in Nigeria. He has written and performed on the Nigerian stage, quite a number of plays. His other plays include: *Pain of Love (2001)*, *Exclusive Business (2001)*, *Sineni's Dilemma*, *Prison Plays (2007)*, (which features a collection of three other plays) *The Query Trilogy (Query Institute, Query for Professor Aburie, Beyond Queries)* amongst others. His plays display a simplistic staging aesthetics which makes them easily adaptable to any kind of stage setting especially school and college stages. The plays display a moralistic prognostication based on the Christian concept of a just society and the future and conditions of human society. Agoro's use of language which endears his plays to the reader has also often been regarded as his best-selling point in his dramas. Like the American playwright and dramatist of the 60's August William, Agoro's plays are narrowly focused domestic dramas each set in a small community and usually deal with themes restricted to the family circle. A social realist, Agoro's plays has a strong emotional thread running through them. *Some-*

thing to Die For, published in a collection with two other plays as *Something to Die For and Two Other Plays* by Caltop Publishers Nigeria Limited in 2001 is our focus in this essay.

Drama and Social Criticism

Drama and social criticism is an old pattern in literary discussions. The playwright has a point of view from which he sees happenings in his society. He makes artistic choices and there are certain things, which motivate and shape his writings. As Biodun Jeyifo rightly observes of Soyinka:

This is particularly true of Soyinka's critical and theoretical writings, which are remarkable for the consistency with which they reflect the well-known artistic stances of the writer: satirist, iconoclast, myth-maker, mystic, and political activist (132).

The artist recourse to social criticism is born out of the need to correct ills for the betterment of his society. Since to assign to oneself the responsibility of exposing and correcting these perceived ills is to set oneself against the perpetrators of these ills, and often the perpetrators are the leaders who wield a certain level of power in any system, the playwright resorts to a certain style which conceals his purpose and therefore needs careful and sensitive reasoning to bring out the truth in a writer's work. Again Biodun Jeyifo says:

Good art, good writing often conceals its purpose and needed serious, sensitive criticism to engage it in an act of collaboration towards the elucidation of meaning which can only be beneficial to society (130).

From antiquity, we learn of Aristophanes poking of fun at Aeschylus and Euripides in his play *The Frogs* (405 B.C.). Plato in his book, *The Republic* (about 380 B.C.), condemned all imitative artists as morally deficient, and Aristotle produced the most enduring critical work in his poetics (about 330 B.C.). This critical tradition of interpreting artistic work in order to bring out their values, which are aimed at correcting perceived ills has continued from the classical period through the middle ages, the renaissance Europe, the 17th and 18th century and 19th to the 20th century to the present day.

Social criticism often takes on the theme of corruption of morals, artistic and social decadence. Since the plays are also conceived as social documents as well as works of art which record the experiences and events which has helped in shaping a people's way of life, hence their values at critically examining how the society's ideals have been maintained or subverted.

The political turbulence and social change in America during the 1960s impacted the drama of the period and in the ensuing decades. A number of playwrights of the time challenged contemporary social codes of behavior in their presentation of different points of view, giving voice to traditionally disenfranchised members of American culture. Many African American dramatic voices of the 1960s had a confrontational edge. In his violent play *Dutchman* (1964), Amiri Baraka portrayed white society's fear and hatred of an educated black protagonist. The autobiographical *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962) by Adrienne Kennedy addressed the difficulties of being an American of mixed racial ancestry (Owomoyela, 3).

The social critical theory of literature stems from the fact that

The writer is part of the current of human thought; the writer shares the language, attitude, tone and voice of his fellows and expresses his values that come from discernible context in society, in a nation and at a period. Against this background and various other views, sociology of literature has concerned itself with the social commitment of art, the position of the writer in society and his relationship to that society (Bamidele 3).

Bamidele's view re-enforces the Marxian critical view of art as a social phenomenon that is geared towards looking at literature from its commitment to contemporary social, economic, psychological and political struggles.

In Africa, the oral literature, as in folktales, alongside with music, oral poetry and other communal performance are often employed for social commentary and instruction and also serve

as a potent means of affirming group values and discouraging anti-social behaviours. Obviously, African writers have carried over this tradition into the literary genre. Most of Nigeria's dramas have been social commentaries, such as Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* (1968) and *Play of Giants* (1984) in which he ridicules African political dictators; Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) in which Osofisan turns his social criticism on the practice of publicly executing armed robbers by the Federal Government of Nigeria, and the recently produced plays on the Niger Delta University stage of Ben Binebai's *The Seventh Virgin* (28th April 2008) and Ken Eni's *Silent Drums* (27th April 2008) in which both playwrights, sharing an affinity of thematic spirit, dramatizes the iniquities of men in leadership positions causing crushing pain and catastrophe on the citizens.

Criticism shares with the audience the point of view of the spectator. One very important instrument of social criticism, which the selected playwright has adopted in his dramatic composition, is satire. Speaking of the function of satire in society, D.I. Nwoga in "The Igbo Poet and Satire" states:

Homogenous, kindred societies depended on the sense of full human dignity being shared by all members. To find oneself regarded as in any way below the standard, to become the object of ridicule, or of children pointing fingers at one and sniggering, was punishment of great dimension. Satire was the verbal equivalent of actions like tying a stolen object around the neck of the thief and parading him through the village (230).

It is this corrective quality that is present in the satiric genre that lends itself easily as an instrument of human inquiry and expression. The social value of drama has never been in doubt. Drama is a sociological phenomenon; it originated from the society, so it is quite impossible to separate it from its societal origin.

Greater understanding of its nature and potential as a means of human inquiry and expression should, however, facilitate the appreciation of its importance and help enrich the quality of entertainment we look for (Hodgson, 12).

This is exactly our main concern in this essay. The study of the works of the dramatist and the dramatist's vision as a tool for appreciating drama and understanding the social vision of the playwright as the playwright expresses the prevailing efforts cultivated by social groups living in a definite milieu.

Something to Die For: A Synopsis

In *Something to Die For*, Tokieme, an only child of Enimotor and Bisi is hospitalized after an overdose of heroine. Being an only child and a lawyer, Tokieme's parents are distraught because of the incident. Enimotor, Tokieme's father, an Assistant Superintendent of Police is concerned over the implication of his son's involvement with drugs and what effect it will have on his image as a police officer and the already battered image of the Nigerian Police Force.

On his discharge from the psychiatric ward, Tokieme reveals to his friend Sopupu that he decided to take into drugs out of frustration resulting from rejection and his inability to find love and acceptance from the women he had dated. Three months following his discharge from the hospital, Tokieme again reveals to Sopupu that he has found love and acceptance with Asueme, the psychiatric nurse who attended to him while he was in hospital. However, Asueme comes from a family that is treated as an outcast within the Epie community because for generations, the family is known to have suffered from leprosy. After an initial objection by Sopupu and Tokieme's parents, Tokieme was able to win the objecting parties over to his side with a stronger bond of love. Enimotor and Bisi formally sanction the union of the couple with their blessings. At the end of the play, the couple is seen living the Epie community to Abuja to start a new life in a place where their background is not known to anybody and where they thought they will be able to find acceptance without any form of social stigmatisation.

Thematic Thrust

In this play, Agoro takes a look at the theme of rejection and acceptance resulting from social cast systems. Using the microcosmic Epie community, he examines broader issues of society which relates to parental love, marriage and marriage relationships, drug use and abuse, suicide and love, and stigmatisation. A number of themes run through the play, although each of these themes is not given complete attention. The playwright's vision is thus split between the

Christian worldview from which he x-rays social issues and the secular worldview which forms his critical butt. He is undecidedly torn between his Christian worldview and the secular worldview on which he bases his theme of rejection and acceptance.

The playwright parallels the Osu (outcast) cast system in Eastern part of Nigerian with the rejection of lepers in Epie community and mirrors it against the background of society's rejection of similar people with challenges of acceptance. Although not mentioned directly, the issue of integrating HIV patients into the larger society become apparent as being at the background of the playwright's mind from a careful reading of the play. The play portrays Agoro as a non-conformist who resists traditionally and socially imposed boundaries.

The Playwright's Social Vision and Critical Butt

In these periods of rapid social changes and social upheavals occasioned by technological advancement and dwindling economic fortunes of the people in a globalised economy, society is witnessing a re-evaluation of previously held traditional values. The shrinking social order occasioned by advances in technology and communication has made the world into what is now known as "global village". The relationship of man with his fellow man has been re-ordered by these emerging technologies. Social criticism by literary artist has therefore appeared to be only a natural response to this social order as a means of examining man's relationship to man within society.

Various aspects of human life and society have been exploited and stressed in dramatic representations. Much of contemporary drama emphasizes a commitment to the changing roles of humans in their environment and society. Humanity in drama is now couched in universal principles. Drama is thus, becoming more concerned with smaller themes that have universal (global) connotations.

Like the 19th century Irish born writer, George Bernard Shaw, Agoro embodies the same spirit of social criticism which inspired Shaw's writing. Both writers make use of economic and sociological theories in crafting their dramas with satirical skills aimed at awakening in the reader the frailties and fatuities of traditional and modern societies. Although Agoro tend to be more realistic in his approach to changing societal values, he seems to be advocating for a

marriage of the new and the old in forging a new world based on his Christian tenets of a moral society. Tokieme, the repentant and rehabilitated drug addict, meets and marries Asueme, a biologically and socially inferior variant who has positive moral qualities. By their standing together against their society, become the champion of a new egalitarian society. Agoro thus based the conflict in the text on the Marxian and Hegelian conflict theory of social change. Through their union, the couple is thus pitted against social forces which compel them to relocate to a new society and forces the old society into re-examining its social value system.

In *Something to Die For*, Agoro finds prescription for a cure to the cast system along with its stigmatisation and discriminatory patterns, in the philosophy of co-existence evolution centred on the Christian concept of love for one's neighbours which surpasses any wound that may have been inflicted by rancorous relationships. The playwright's social vision is one of deconstructing and reconstructing society through drama. Through the union of Asueme and Tokieme, the playwright suggests love and marriage as a stronger bond against age-long stigmatisation and traditional values. This is quite a bold step when viewed from the fact that societal rejection of such affiliations and unions is total.

Sopupu: Toky, that Girl! Though she is beautiful, educated and well behaved and may well be a virgin (shakes his head), should not be someone you should marry.

Tokieme: Why, if I may ask.

Sopupu: You should know the family she comes from. The stigma attached to it is not one you should get connected to.

Tokieme: That her great grandparents were lepers? That her grandfather worked in a leper colony and later married her grandmother who had suffered from leprosy? That her parents are all products of families that had suffered from leprosy? (Agoro, 30).

By Tokieme accepting to marry Asueme despite her tainted family line which separates her into a lower social cast against the traditional practice of his people, the playwright uses the

two characters to dismantle the systems and structures that hold the cast system in Epie community together and proposes new structures for the society to adopt in combating the problem. He proposes love as a weapon which can break down socially imposed boundaries. While Sopupu represents society in its changing state, Asueme and Tokieme represent the new world and the positive future of society. Bisi and Enimotor become the old world that must be done away with before the new can exert itself. Thus Agoro jettisoned the social status and cast system existing in Epie community on the altar of love.

Here, the playwright takes an evaluative look at the social cast system in Epie community, reworking it into his utopian ideal fused with his own definition of a value system based on his Christian concept of a just society. The playwright thus demonstrates Bamidele's summation that "the literary forms in prose, poem or play attempt to re-create the social world of man's relation with his family, with politics, with the state in its economic or religious construct" (4). The idea that one man can stand against an entire tribe and win them over by a single act of conflict relationship is utopia. Yet, history has shown that change is possible and most often begin with small conflicts that snowball into catalyst of greater change. The plausibility of this utopian ideal is thus verified at the experiential level as possible. Here lies the strength of the proposal for change in *Something to Die For*.

Something to Die For is crafted along the line of New Humanist Literary theory as put forward by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More in that the play tows the moralist line which seek the overthrow of old standards while creating and adopting new ones for society. The social cast system of traditional Epie society is jettisoned along with the stigmatisation attached to it in favour of the re-absorption of the previously disadvantaged cast. In this case, through the love and marriage relationship between Asueme and Tokieme, Asueme is re-absorbed into society and her social cast enhanced. Tokieme became the ritual career of Asueme's biological and sociological failings for Asueme's social salvation.

Tokieme is without a family fault that warrants his rejection by women rather, as someone from a reputable family and a practicing lawyer, he is cast in the light of an eligible bachelor whom every girl should seek to marry, but for unknown reasons cannot find a girl who loves him enough to want to marry him. Although Tokieme's decision to marry Asueme could be seen as a

brave act, it is however hinged on previous rejections and his personal longing for acceptance.

Tokieme: Why must it always be so with me. I was often rejected, so I felt I was worthless, so engaged in drugs. Now I have been accepted by a lady and you are suggesting that marrying her would mean my estrangement from our small local community.

Sopupu: It is true in her you have found one who accepts you. But by and by you'd come by that kind of girl even if you discontinue this affair (Agoro, 31).

Asueme equally shows signs of low self-esteem when she says that:

Asueme: I'll be to you a cross you'll carry daily. You're going to be risking your reputation because of me. You will risk your life every day because of me, the way serious Christians are open to danger because of their commitment to Jesus Christ. (Agoro, 34).

Could this be really called acceptance or merely two rejected and disadvantaged people with similar psychological problems finding a common ground and flocking together? The playwright does not provide us any information as to the reason why an educated lawyer in a small community, who has a good family background, cannot find a girl to marry among his own people. As a matter of fact, Tokieme is presented in the light of someone who has received lots of parental love. Someone who has never lacked anything his parents could offer. Also his parents belong to the top echelon in his community. In this light, he should ordinarily be one that girls should seek to marry. But for un-disclosed reasons only finds rejection. However, on finding Asume, a socially inferior cast, is prepared to lose all for the love of his life, (including family and friends) his resilience wins those opposed to his union to his side.

Furthermore, Tokieme's recourse to the Church for a means of employment at the end of the play smacks of the Grecian Deix Machina. It again shows Tokieme as rejected by his legal profession since he has been sacked earlier by the chambers he works for because of the incident

of his involvement with drugs. He did not join the church employment out of choice, but out of self-inflicted psychological complex. His embrace of the Christian faith does not proceed out of an inner conviction of belief but out of circumstantial exploitation. His feeling of love emanates from acceptance and not out of fondness rooted in the emotions of like and dislike.

One major criticism of *Something to Die For* is its shallow treatment of character. Characters are not given rounded treatment. The development and transition from exposition to resolution of the events in the play is fraught with inconsistencies of time, character growth, and moral portrayal. For instance, there is nowhere in the play that the marriage between Auseme and Tokieme is contracted and yet they leave for Abuja together at the end of the play as husband and wife. Is the playwright by this suggesting cohabitation as the new social order for born again Christians? Like the American dramatist of the 60s, August Williams, Agoro's play is a narrowly focused domestic comedy that is set in a small community and deals with a theme restricted to family circles.

Conclusion

In attempting to present universal truth about life, the dramatist creates his work to reflect social themes that appeal stronger to his moral and aesthetic predilections. *Something To Die For* weaves an elaborate sociological tapestry that is emblematic of many communities. It features an attempt by a dramatist to reconstruct and re-shape traditional perception and belief of a people through drama. By criticizing the concept of the cast system in Epie community and successfully dismantling the ideological base of its practice, Agoro, join ranks with such social critical dramatist of commitment like Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Esiaba Irobi, Emaka Nwabueze, and Chimalu Nwakwo, whose experimental attempts has yielded a large following in the Nigerian literary scene.

Something to Die For, thus, features a frank exploration of the theme of acceptance and rejection. Although a level of inconsistency exist in the plotting of events in the play as have been pointed out, it however does not diminish the social critical bite when perceived from the light of the theme explored by the text.

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