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Revolutionary Aesthetics and Semiotic Analysis of Olu Obafemi's *Dark Time are Over*?

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Abstract

The paper is a critique of Olu Obafemi's *Dark Times are Over?* The play is a satiric and socio-political commentary on the despicable and obnoxious condition of the Nigerian society. The play is a sad commentary on the socio-political and legal system in Nigeria with particular focus on the university campuses. The paper reviews the preponderance of social issues in the dramatic works of British dramatists such as Ibsen Henrik and Bernard Shaw and the postcolonial plays of Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan and Niyi Osundare as introductory to the dramaturgical appraisal of Olu Obafemi's play. The paper countenances the play's themes of cultism, campus prostitution, bribery, moral decadence, inequality and social injustice both as overriding themes in Olu Obafemi's literary works and as images of the unpleasant and appalling socio-economic and socio-political situation in Nigeria. The theoretical framework of the paper is based on behaviour theory of Albert Bandura which attributes misbehaviours in the society to

environmental contingencies as the bane of societal crises and the root causes of youthful restiveness, cultism and prostitution which are displayed with latitude and which have become the permanent features in the Nigerian society. The paper also captures art as a veritable tool for tackling and protesting against the prevailing socio maladies confronting the society. A critical discussion of the play is undertaken to reveal its thematic and dramatic motifs as well as its dramaturgical inadequacies and their consequences on the play's radical instinct.

Keywords: Drama, Criticism, Social Issues, Olu Obafemi, Semiotics.

Introduction

One of the incontestable and inalienable functional responsibilities of literature is its ability to countenance the societal realities and make art relevant to the needs of the society. This is because art and the society have a symbiotic relationship. It is little wonder, therefore, why creative artists of all ages especially the postcolonial African writers react in a most determined and vociferous way to the various oddities and absurdities prevalent in African societies occasioned by the leadership recklessness, capitalistic and dictatorial tendencies inherent in African leaders.

Literature is replete with excremental images and throttling expositions on the incandescent discourse on the various social maladies confronting the society. The social responsibilities of the artist to the society in capturing the societal sensibilities and in satirizing the various ills of the society become inevitable since the artist from the Marxist and Sociological perspectives is seen as the voice, conscience and the memory of the society. The artist, therefore, must be responsive, perceptive, reflective, and sensitive to the stifling societal issues and challenges that are capable of impacting negatively on the people's existence especially the survival of the masses that is principally the focus and the concern of the artist. This, therefore, explains the justification for the preponderance of social issues in the postcolonial African literature.

Ibsen Henrik, one of the foremost Norwegian dramatists devoted his later realistic plays to addressing societal problems. *In the Pillars of Society*, Ibsen snarls at the society that is ridden with corruption, deception and moral depravity, while in *A Doll's House*, Ibsen depicts the

inevitability of crime in a society that dehumanizes its citizens by depriving them of access to education but subjects its citizens to accept a doll's existence. Besides, in *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen according to Gassner, depicts the smugness and the duplicities of a reputable society that is readily anxious to profit at the detriment of the comfort of its people (Ibsen 373). Bernard Shaw too another British playwright in his plays such as *St. Joan, Mrs Warren's Profession, Arms and the Man* displays his prowess as a playwright and the intrinsic knack of drama to positively correct the ills of the society.

The African dramatists also address social problems in their plays. Wole Soyinka satirizes religious hypocrisy in *The Trial of Brother Jero*, tradition versus modernity, the role of women in the society, love and marriage and colonial exploitation in *The Lion and the Jewel*. Soyinka in *The Beatification of Area Boy* protests against the savagery of gluttony and oppression. The play has been described as "an example of static, ritualistic drama, an extended exposition of alienated and plaintive existence in a postcolonial and post traditional world" (*Daily Times*). The play also deals with race and class issues.

Niyi Osundare, as a committed Marxist, addresses socio-economic and socio-political issues in society. For instance, he tackles ostentation, flaunting of ill-gotten wealth, cultural dysfunctions, betrayal, hunger, oppression and exploitation of the masses in *The Wedding Car. The State Visit* also addresses the society's descent into moral decadence and social debauchery. Femi Osofisan, one of the distinguished and most fecund African playwrights and dramatists and a ferocious social crusader deploys his theatre to confront the malignant and intractable social problems in the society. In *Birthdays are not for Dying, Altine's Wrath, The Album of the Midnight Blackout, Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels, Aringindin and Nightwatchmen and Who's Afraid of Solarin?* among others, Osofisan tackles frontally the problem of graft and corruption, gratifications, greed and avarice. He also addresses the issue of oppression, injustice, social inequality, insecurity and the need for love and reconciliation in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage, Morountodun* and *No More the Wasted Breed*.

As a committed Marxist and socially conscious artist, Olu Obafemi in several of his plays satirizes the social issues confronting the African societies with a view to proffering solutions to them. Olu Obafemi understands the societal dynamics and the various inanities that are brazenly perpetuated with impunities by African people who appear to have natural proclivity for displaying all forms of social disorders that ostensibly have, unfortunately, become part of the

societal natural ethos and norms. This paper, is therefore, a critique of Olu Obafemi's *Dark Times are Over?* from sociological perspective.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the Behaviour Theory of Albert Bandura. Psychological and sociological discourses on the human behaviour have generated a lot of debates on the determiners of human behaviour in the society. While humanists emphasize that human behaviours are solely controlled genetically, behavioural theorists attribute human behaviours to environmental exigencies.

Skinner, a psychologist on learning theory submits that human behaviours are both influenced by genetic and environmental contingencies. According to him "A person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him" (Skinner 211). According to Bandura, 'behaviour partly creates the environment, and the environment influences the behaviour in a reciprocal fashion' (Bandura 866). His slogan is that 'change contingencies and you change behaviour and change behaviour and you change the contingencies' (Bandura 866).

So, it is the belief of environmental psychologists and sociologists that people's behaviours are determined by external forces. Such forces include corruption, inequalities and the socio-injustice in the larger society. Any attempt to enforce prohibitions on such behaviours that are considered detrimental to the society will further engender societal conflicts. Also, reliance on individual conscience to mitigate moral and ethical conduct in the society is inadequate to control behavioural issues. The ultimate panacea to curtailing such misbehaviours is advocacy for social change. Until the society is transformed and a new social order is put in place, it will be difficult to control the behaviours of people. This is because the micro society like the university is a reflection of the macro society.

A Critique of the Play

Olu Obafemi's *Dark Times are Over?* is a scathing and poignant commentary on the moral decadence that is characteristic of the higher institutions in Nigeria. Femi Osofisan in *Oriki of a Grasshopper* condemns the ivory towers for their debauchery and unscrupulousness. The

Universities that should be the pacesetters and the bakery of knowledge have become an intellectual desert and a citadel of corruption. The play depicts the stark reality of the dilemma of the intellectuals who are expected to provide the desired moral, social and intellectual leadership to the younger generation who are still under their guardianship. The play involves Claudius, a business man and a capitalist who makes money out of living through exploitation of the poor, Imaro, a University lecturer and a socialist whose business is to make words and Moni, Imaro's girlfriend and fellow socialist.

Niyi Osundare in *The Wedding Car* also depicts the rot in the university system. He also tackles the issues of compromises and betrayals among the intellectuals and Marxists who had earlier vowed to speak for the poor but who suddenly renege due to the lust for money and power. Most of those Marxists, according to Osundare are now found on the corridors of power feasting with the bourgeoisies they had earlier carped.

In *Dark Times are Over?* The playwright condemns the Nigerian university campuses that have become brothels and where "glamourized prostitution" thrives. The present University Kegites today are portrayed as "rotten and corrupt." "They have turned their gyration venue to a sex abode" (9). Girl 1, Girl 2, Girl 3 and Other Girls who are undergraduates are prostitutes on campus. Baby, one of the prostitutes enters the hostel at 2:30 am from her sexual expedition. The Porter collects bribe from her before she allows her to enter the hostel. After collecting the money, the Porter says "Why you con dey act as if you no know the formula before, before. Okay enter now good girl" (4).

The prostitute has now become a good girl after bribing the Porter. What an irony? The Porter is also responsible for recruiting prostitutes for the rich like Alhaji Maikudi in the hostel. According to Alhaji "I want to spend my money with beautiful beautiful girls. I wan make you helf me get two beautiful girls" (6). The Porter who should be providing security for the girls in the hotel has become the recruitment officer for harlotry. Prostitution is practised on our campuses today with impunity. Even in spite of the poor English spoken by Alhaji, the Girls are after his money. The Nigerian female students have thrown decorum and decency into the wind and embraced lasciviousness. Girl 2, while narrating her sexual voyage to other prostitutes and advertising herself to Alhaji, says with pride "

Me I get plenty things to yarn oh, una wan hear? That man yesterday, I flabbergasted him. I took him to the right. To the left. To the middle. As if that one no do me. I come take am to heaven, from heaven to the earth. From earth down to hell again" (5).

Prostitution as depicted in this play is a serious business in the Nigerian University campuses. The playwright condemns the shameful act in unambiguous terms when he says through the Narrator "

It is quite unfortunate, yes quite unfortunate. Parents sent you to the University to learn but alas, you have turned yourself to aristo babes. You have glamorized prostitution on our campuses by selling your body to the highest bidder. Get down from my stage, will you get down from my stage at once? (8).

Asking the girls to get down from the stage is an expression of the playwright's anger, rejection and condemnation of prostitution among the female undergraduates. Unfortunately, the Girls retort and say "Wetin dey do you. Na your body sef? Na we get our body (They hiss and walk out)" (8). Their response shows their lack of readiness to stop the shameful business. It is also an expression of hopelessness and impossibility that prostitution will be very difficult to wipe out of the Nigerian universities.

Another ethical issue addressed by the playwright in this play is the prevalence of cultism in the Nigerian universities. It is an unfortunate phenomenon that has insidiously crept into the universities with its devastating consequences. The Narrator in the text tells us that

Muslims and Christians from decent backgrounds but unfortunately, they have turned themselves into cultists; raping, looting, and killing innocent students. This is the peak of societal degeneration. Our campuses have become dens of terror, like life in the shadow of death... I hear our love gardens on campuses have become shallow graves (9-11).

It is this moral decadence that Solomon Edebor, a budding playwright, further addresses skilfully and sternly in *Good Morning, Sodom* and *The Whirlwind* where the Nigerian youths in institutions of higher learning are intractably and irremediably enmeshed in rape, cultism and gruesome murder of innocent students.

Beatrice, an indecently dressed victim of rape in the play narrates her harrowing ordeals in the hands of the rapists and says regrettably

I am ruined. My life is finished. They have destroyed my life ooo! Those evil bastards. They invited me to join their club. I thought it was a godly, open club. Now see my predicament. They say even if I am in the bedroom of an Army General. They'll fish me out and pluck out my eyes before they shoot me dead. Those devils have done their worst. (16-18).

The narration of Beatrice above is the gory story of many rape victims in Nigerian Universities where the playwright, Olu Obafemi had spent his entire working career before he retired as a professor. Beatrice symbolises thousands of Nigerian students who have been trapped and raped by criminally minded-students with impunity.

The Narrator comments regrettably on the vandalisation of the dignity of Beatrice and the sacredness of our universities.

Our campuses used to be safe havens, where freedom bred and blossomed. No, not anymore. They have vandalized the purity and pride of that young and innocent girl. In other circumstances, there is brutal physical assault of deadly proportions. They are omnipotent. She dares not reveal the identity of her destroyers and assailants (21).

The quote above clearly shows that the Nigerian University campuses that used to be safe havens have now become the abodes of rapists, cultists and murderers where the lives of innocent and promising youths are destroyed incurably. The playwright, through this quote, is worried about the omnipotence and brutality of these assailants and the powers behind them.

Beatrice symbolises many Nigerian University students who have become victims and captives of cultists and who continue to live in perpetual fear. Yepa I and Yepa 2 who are cultists in the play boast of their unassailable powers to intimidate and subdue their victims. The excerpts below contain the images of fear and terror, the vision and the mission statements and the operational strategies of the cultists:

Yepa 1: What is your power? Your business was to dig hard and subdue. Ultimate power, power to seduce, power to kill. Power to frighten those who claim to have knowledge, power to threaten those grey-headed teachers out of their labs and cool offices, power to change the marks or force them to award grades.

Yepa 2: Yes man, ultimate power for four or five of us to mount a single butter-eating babe. Power to subdue spoilt children who are inheriting looted wealth. Force them to submit their money and their smooth bodies. (23).

The following expressions in the quote above: "to dig hard and subdue," "power to seduce," "power to kill," "power to frighten," "power to change the marks," "force them to submit their money and their smooth bodies," etc. contain images of fear and terror. These images further establish that cultists in Nigerian University campuses have murderous and criminal intentions towards students and their lecturers.

Some of the activities of campus secret cults according to Ogunbameru (9) include 'nocturnal initiation ceremonies, involvement in black magic, use of drug, pure deception, extortion, rape, maiming, stealing, arson, examination malpractice and murder.' It sounds incredible that these cultists are Nigerian undergraduates maiming and killing innocent students like themselves. It is the height of man's inhumanity to man. *The Daily Times* opinion on this issue shows that

The increase menace of occultism in academic communities has baffled most people. Campuses are to be centres of reason and scientific outlook; are supposed to be the primary guide to behaviour. The rise in the number of associations with weird and horrifying names has polluted the otherwise pacific and serene environments of the campuses.

According to Owoeye (18), 'campus cult is evidence of a society dead to itself screaming but never hear its voice. The reason for cult violence can be located in the failure to vent this anger on society and government. The students now visit the violence upon themselves.'

During the prosecution of the cultists in court, one of the reasons they give for their involvement in rape is the indecent dressing of women in the society. They blame the laxity of the parents and the society that allows such indecency. In the defence of Yepa 1 before the Judge, he says "

As for rape, you all saw how she dressed or undressed? Barely enough to cover the teasing parts. What man can resist that? We were all moved except those who were cowardly or frigid. I am as guilty as the parents and the permissive society which allow such open acts of sexual harassment. (34)

According to Igboin and Awoniyi (58), "provocative dressing has led...to sexual immorality and promotion of prostitution and general sexual promiscuity on campus. Indecent dressing, which indeed is the trademark, facilitates the trade of campus prostitutes." Indecent dressing among the youths today has become an intractable embarrassment to the society. Parents and religious organisations have been accused of sloppiness and negligence in the discharge of their responsibilities as watchmen and guards. Many universities have been forced to put in place a set

code of conduct that makes indecent dressing, which is a breach of the university matriculation oath by students punishable. Unfortunately, there appears to be some laxity in the enforcement of the dress code. This is perhaps because the country at large appears to be apathetic to the lewd and licentious trend among the Nigerian university students.

The playwright also blames the increase in the crime rate among the youths on the politicians and political godfathers who recruit youths and arm them with ammunitions and money as political thugs during elections and dispense with them after winning the elections. Such youths, out of frustration and poverty, resort to terrorism. That is the fate of Yepa 1 and Yepa 2 who are once recruits for their political godfathers but who are later abandoned and told according to Godfather "to look for other means of survival. No more windfalls" (33). In the explanation of Yepa 1 in court, he says

Of course, I am not guilty. I only partook in the general game of survival in Odaju land, laid us off after the elections, we the ex-recruits need to continue to survive since our masquerade can no longer dance to silent drums. *Eyin* guys, we terrorise Odaju land. We took to the roads to collect the shares that are no more forthcoming. Am I totally to blame? My actions were compelled by poverty and the need to survive (32-33).

The cultists, like other criminals in the society, have no qualms for their misdeeds. Due to the connections that they have, they continue to unleash terror on the innocent in the society with relish. That is why one of the rapists boasts of his invincibility and omnipotence to Beatrice, the rape victim that he will get her even if she hides in the bedroom of an Army General in case she discloses the identity of the rapist. That is the tragedy of Nigerian politicians.

Olu Obafemi also indicts the legal system of the Nigerian society using the land of Odaju, the setting of the play as a microcosm of the macrocosm. Yepa 1 and Yepa 2 are arrested, prosecuted and accused of raping an innocent girl among other accusations. Yepa 1 is surprised that he is the only one brought before the presiding judge. The presiding judge, who is the aunt of Yepa 2 has bribed the DPO to release Yepa 2 with one million naira. Consequently, Yepa 2 is released and flown out of the country.

To the playwright, this is clear case of injustice. According to Agbe in the play "our court of law in Odaju land is an appendage to the larger rotten system out there. It is a place justice has been sold for a mesh of porridge by a rotten, corrupt and nepotic leadership" (40). This is indeed a satire on the Nigerian judicial system. The playwright further blames the increase in crime wave

on the socio-injustice in Nigeria. According to him, "Yepa 1 is guilty, so are all those who perpetuate social injustice in our land." (42). In a society like Nigeria where our laws are discriminatory and inequitable where such laws take their tolls on the poor and the pen robbers with a stroke of pen command billions of dollars and go scot-free, such a society makes increase in crime rate inevitable. For the playwright, dark times will be over only when there is socio justice and equality before the law the absence of which is responsible for these dark times in the Nigerian society.

In terms of language use, the playwright has successfully depicted his expertise in the utilization of the appropriate linguistic terms and registers to reflect the social domains and the semiotic universe of the characters. Members of the Kegites Club, cultists and the campus prostitutes known as *aristo babes* speak in restricted codes and slangs that are only meant for members of their societies. The playwright amply demonstrates his familiarity with these campus groups and their registers in this play. This is one the distinguishing stylistic features that add glamour to the aesthetics and the revolutionary impulse of the play. The table below presents some of these slangs and their correct interpretations:

S/N	Name of	Slang	Meaning/Interpretation
	Group		
1.	Kegites Club	My heart dey gigi	My heart is vibrating or
		gigi gbam gbam	burning for lust.
2.	Kegites Club	I wan to jabo	I want to have sex with a
			female Kegite.
3.	Kegites Club	I wan to sewere	I am going crazy for love
4.	Kegites Club	I wan to pepe	I want to catch a slender lady.
5.	Aristo Babes	Aristo babes	Campus prostitutes
6.	Aristo Babes	Kere wawa	To have sexual intercourse or
			fucking
7.	Aristo Babes	Slender-slender, Lèpa	To be slender is the best
		lọṃo	

8.	Aristo Babes	Puff-puff, Òròbò	To be fat is the best
		lọmọ	
9.	Aristo Babes	Hip-star, randy ass	My big hip is an asset
		lọmọ	
10.	Cultists	Zongwe	A cult member
11.	Cultists	Qmo awo	A cult member
12.	Cultists	Katakátá don burst	There is problem.

Dramaturgical Inaccuracies

In spite of the play's theatrical strength and the playwright's ingenuity, there are a few inaccuracies and unrealistic scenes. The playwright adopts the presentational mode which is a typical of the theatre of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre. The Narrator recruits people for the play shortly before Beatrice is raped in scene 1. The recruits include Christians, Moslems and representatives of the Jaycee and Man O' War who sing Christian, Moslem and Man O' War songs together while the audience joins them.

We do not understand if the playwright is trying to promote religious tolerance. Even though we know that the Directors in dramatic presentations do not consider religious considerations in the compositions of the cast except for dramatic purposes, the copulation of Christians, Moslems and secular organisations to sing together sounds unrealistic. The playwright makes his choices from the Christian Union and the Moslem Students Society who are noted for their uncompromising attitudes or religious extremism on campus. They will naturally see either the code mixing or code switching of their songs as a sign of religious compromise not to talk of Christians singing together with Man O' War members. It is considered worldliness and therefore a taboo. Christianity, for instance does not believe in syncretism as the playwright signifies here.

Also, in scene 1, after Beatrice has been raped, we are told that both the Christian sisters (speaking in tongues) and Moslem brothers pray to revive Beatrice. This is shown in the quote below:

Jaycee: With confidence in humanity, the evil forces will be relegated. Love will overcome... (Suddenly, there is an outburst of screams and Beatrice collapses. Speaking in tongues, the Christian sisters and Moslem brothers pray and *Elimi loruko awon ogun orun* and Lai la ila la fervently in succession as they surround her to revive her.

Jaycee: Dark days must be truly over. (On that note of resolve, they carry Beatrice out as the Christian and Moslem brethren sing out of stage) (19-20).

If literature must reflect and capture the essence of society, this is an unrealistic scene. It is not true to life. Even on the University campus, you cannot find Christian brethren and Moslem brethren praying and singing together even if they have the common enemy to deal with most especially when both sides see each other as infidels. The play should have been devoid of any religious sentiments. This artificial welding of Christians and Moslems together can trigger religious angst. It is definitely considered a major deficiency in the play.

Besides, the paramilitary groups on our campuses like the Man O' War and Jaycee are depicted as formidable forces that are poised for the eradication of cultism from Nigerian university campuses. Several members of the paramilitary groups like Man O' War and Cadet have been accused of belonging to secret societies on campus. For instance, there is a ban on all paramilitary groups at Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Nigeria because some members of one of the groups tortured and murdered a student of the university. Those involved have been declared wanted by the police. So, the paramilitary groups on university campuses today cannot be portrayed as saviours and deliverers of Nigerian university students as the playwright has indicated in this play just as the Nigeria police cannot be completely extricated from criminal activities in the country.

Conclusion

The paper has shown that Olu Obafemi's play, *Dark Times Are Over?* is a sad commentary on the socio-political and legal system in Nigeria. It is a poignant satire on the moral decadence that has unfortunately engulfed the Nigerian university system. The complete desecration and despoliation of our campuses is a grave concern to Olu Obafemi. The theatre, therefore, becomes a veritable weapon for him to ventilate his anger and revulsion against these inanities and criminalities that have taken hold of the Nigerian youths who are being trained with a lot of

resources as future leaders of the society. The play portends a dark future for the country unless there is an urgent intervention. If citadels of learning have become dens of terrors, the future repercussions are indeed very grave. The playwright proposes an alternative social system that is devoid of nepotism, corruption and socio injustice where equality, equity and socio-justice will thrive. Only then can the university campuses which are reflections of the larger society become safe and havens of peace and knowledge.

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