

## DRAMA AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN OLA ROTIMI'S *HOPES OF THE LIVING DEAD*

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### Abstract

*The primordial task of the dramatist as a catalyst for social change is likened to that of a journalist, whose job is to source for information from all corners of the society. The dramatist processes this information and presents them to the society, unveiling the conflicts and tensions in the society and of course stimulating members of the public into redefining their steps for meaningful development to occur. Dramatic literature has played a functional role towards this end; it provides relevant suggestions for the betterment of the nation. In this paper, an assessment of Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* is carried out to see the potency of the drama medium for instructing, correcting, educating and mobilizing the people into taking proactive measures that could bring forth growth and development in all facets of the nation for the attainment of a responsible and responsive nationhood.*

### Introduction

Society is made complex partly because human nature is always in constant change. Therefore, society is not static and social change is a constant phenomenon that affects every phase of existence. Dramatists as catalyst for social change have emerged over the years using their art of writing or performance as a vibrant tool for the reduction of moral decadence that permeates the society thereby fostering social change.

Dramatists have contributed in no small measure towards the development of the nation, through the honorable task of re-constructing the society in the same way the journalist, politician, banker, etc does. Unlike the others, he has nothing to show for it in terms of material gains. In defining the role of the dramatists and their arts as catalyst for social change and moral transformation, Ngugi submits that:

A writer responds with his total personality to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of a sensible needle, he records with varying degrees of accuracy and success the conflicts and tension in his changing society. Thus, the same writer will produce different types of works sentiments degree of optimism and even world view. For the writer himself lives in and is shaped by history (47).

Ngugi's assertion presupposes that writers help in reshaping thoughts and mending attitudes to transform society. Writers use their art as a means of bringing about sustainability in our decaying society. In the light of this Ojaide questions what writers ought to be and to reawaken and stimulate them into taking more actions:

...What are writers in countries with sit-tight presidents doing about the governance of their states? Have writers not become too silent in the face of power, too soft and distracted by other considerations to speak truth to power? Contemporary African writers have to responsibly create texts that advance the vision and ideals of their respective communities (6).

The obligation in Ojaide's position sums up the fact that writers/dramatists are expected to creatively write works that question the polity and advance various ways in which all forms of vices will be curbed or reduced. It is imperative to note therefore that, writers/dramatists have played a primordial role in transforming the society through their creative works. Ngugi commenting on the roles of literature and the dramatist who create the literatures captures thus:

Literature cannot escape from the power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice whether he is aware of it or not, his work reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and biological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battle field, the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that they try to heap the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics? (58).

Extrapolating from the above, one is meant to understand that literature and indeed the dramatists who convey the message must therefore strive to expose anti-humanist forces in order to improve the values and quality of human lives. Thus, seeing these in perspective therefore, Hagher, capitalizing on Ngugi's position submits that:

All writings embody themes and world views. A writer's theme and world view determines whether he can serve as a conscience of his society or the predator. As the conscience of the society, the role of the writer is to be in league with the victim. The role is to help the victims of society recover from being preyed upon, and more than that, to take control of her destiny to reassert her active participation. To do this, the writer must have the right philosophical perspective of society from which the writer interprets reality (47).

Hagher's point of view becomes paramount to note in that the dramatist serves as catalyst for social change for they are the ones that speak for the masses. In like manner, Akorede in asserting the role of the dramatist states that; "One of the basic responsibilities of the literary artist is to comment on the issues of his time and he can go further still to suggest solutions to existing problems or predict through the power of his pen, the future if such problems are not solved" (68).

The above assertion agrees with our position that the dramatist's role in reshaping the society is a pivotal tool, owing to the fact that dramatists throughout the world create works to reflect on issues that bother on society with the aim of salvaging our repugnant and repulsive society for the better.

Akorede goes on to say that:

During the colonial days, dramatists like Hubert Ogunde, used the medium of drama to fight against the social injustice, tyranny and suppression that were perpetuated by the colonialism. He also used his drama to agitate for Nigerian's independence (68).

Deducing from Akorede's view point, one would draw the conclusion that dramatists have used their art variously to question and instruct society for humanity's development. It is in the light of the foregoing that an assessment of Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* is used as a paradigm to help explicate the role of the drama as the onus of social change.

### **Drama and Social Change**

Dramatic literature has made indelible marks in reshaping societies the world over. Drama is part of the society and as it grows, man grows and if it flourishes, man flourishes. This leaves us with no choice than to say that dramatic literature is a reflection of humanity and by inference, the knowledge of drama is a powerful medium for mankind's development. Abugh notes that; "Since the early man's hunting expedition down to the classical period, drama has been a tool that mirrors the society, showing its ills as well as suggesting solutions to ensure a just and egalitarian society to enhance social change" (4).

In looking at the cognitive and positive role of dramatic literature, Yu Lukin holds that:

The social function of art is multi-layered. Any truly important work of art serves as a means of cognizing life, expressing the artist's attitudes to the world, his class sympathies, anti-pathies and his attitude to man and society is a means for forming the personality and its world outlook and moral awakening of creative abilities in the reader, viewer or listener and develops and perfects aesthetic tastes. In other words, the relationship of art to man is complex, composed of all diverse functions. It is an important factor of the intellectual practical influence aimed towards changing and perfecting man (104).

It is worth agreeing with the above submission that drama has played a vital role in transforming the society. Undoubtedly, there is no society of the world, whether consciously or unconsciously that has not experienced drama in one form or the other. Robert succinctly captures that "drama is the art of people acting out and giving witness to their most pressing, most illuminating and most inspiring concerns" (5). Robert's viewpoint aptly affirms the fact that drama inevitably plays a significant role in the development of the society. In the light of the above also Bamidele agrees that "drama is to be nothing if not social, and that in an era like our own, it is to do nothing if not to contribute to social and revolutionary change" (15). This explains the fact that drama is vital towards redefining the well-being of society.

Dramatic literature does not exist in a vacuum. For drama to be relevant and result-oriented, Ngugi writes that "Literature (drama) results from conscious act of men in society.

At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship; one is writing about somebody for somebody” (5). This also shows the relevance of dramatic literature towards social change, since the thrust and indeed the essence of its creation is for somebody and about somebody for something to happen. Ngugi further captures that:

As a product of men's intellectual and imaginative activity, it should embody in words and images, the tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming so that it becomes a reflection on the aesthetic and imaginative planes of a community wrestling with its total environment to produce the basic means of life... (7).

This shows that art (drama) is reflective of what the society holds and is meant to checkmate and correct societal misdeeds towards pragmatic change. The power that drama has in educating, entertaining, informing and mobilizing the people is not in doubt as Jacobus aptly captures thus:

Drama (theatre) is an experience in which we participate on many levels simultaneously. On one level, we may believe that what we see is really happening; on another level, we realize that serious statements about our society are being made: Drama both entertains and instructs (1).

The above underscores the fact that drama is a fulcrum in the emancipation of society through its content and standards. Olu Obafemi commenting on the functional role of the dramatists and their arts submits that:

The development of a revolutionary alternative approach to art and theatre among young Nigerian playwrights forms part of the growing radical tendency. This development manifests itself in the young playwright's commitment to the employment of the revolutionary potential of theatre to sharpen social awareness, adopt an alternative approach (socialist to be precise) to the obsolescence they find in the body politics of present Nigeria and presenting recipes for social changes (32).

Over the years, many dramatists have emerged using their plays as inspiration for social change to address issues that bother on society using different styles, approaches and design. Sokpo on his part notes that:

...drama is able to project to humanity all forms of unacceptable behaviour or practices that are inimical to the development of society. The essence is for society to realize the harmful nature of its actions and struggle to make amends. The theatre does not claim to have all the answers to challenges faced by humanity but it rather gingers humanity into deep and critical inflection, so as to explore proactive strategies of dealing with the arduous challenges that faces mankind (35).

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Sokpo's position underscores the fact that though, drama does not provide solutions to all nagging problems but it gingers the society in taking proactive measures in solving problems faced by mankind.

It becomes imperative to conclude from the foregoing that drama is indeed a vital stimulus that urges societal development. Quality drama serves as a social course and transformative medium. Dramatists must have it at the back of their minds that, their drama must be relevant in the fight against social vices and re-orientation of the society for meaningful development to occur.

### Synopsis of the Play

*Hopes of the Living Dead* is an action-packed and thought-provoking piece filled with suspense. It is a play of struggle based on the events that took place in colonial Nigeria of 1924. Ikoli Harcourt-Whyte and forty other lepers are collected from all over Nigeria, kept in Port Harcourt General Hospital for an experiment on the cure of leprosy. The experiment at the initial stage is given maximum attention but it soon becomes unpopular following constant complaints from regular patients who feel that their already bad health is being jeopardized more by their exposure to the lepers. The constant complaints pitch the regular patients against the hospital authority; as a result, Dr Fergusson eventually abandons the experiment and leaves for his home country, Scotland. The leprosy patients are therefore, left in a state of hopelessness and helplessness. They are left without a doctor to attend to them and equally face an eviction notice from the hospital authorities. This singular act propels the leprosy patients to look within themselves for a solution to their problem. They unite under the leadership of Ikoli Harcourt-Whyte who makes them believe that their success lies within their collective struggle rather than an individual self. In the end, they are given consideration as a place of their own is provided by the government.

### Investigating Elements of Social Change in *Hopes of the Living Dead*

The major thrust of the play is collective struggle aimed at informing the society and stimulating the masses into believing that with unity even "mountains" could be moved. In *Hopes of the Living Dead*, lepers are drawn from about eight different ethnic groups and put in one place for an experiment to be carried out on them. In like manner, they all put aside their tribal/ethnic differences and this singular act leads to the success they achieve by the end of the play. In the light of the above, Obafemi and Yerima describe the action in *Hopes of the Living Dead* as "multiplicity of languages has been turned into a positive instrument of mass mobilization, of struggle on stage and can be replicated in contemporary social struggle...." (90). This underscores the fact that the dramatist uses this play to inform members of the society that the spirit of oneness should be their watch word and once that is held onto, social change will be the reward.

Upon the discovery that Dr Fergusson would be leaving the country and of course the experiment will be abandoned, Ikoli Harcourt-Whyte tells his fellow inmates that:

HW:... From now on, we are alone. We fool ourselves if we believe that the big men of this place will care for us as before. We fool ourselves, if we think the world outside will give us peace to continue to be as of one blood, together

in this place. Children of our fathers, our struggle has begun (pp. 21-22).

Ikoli Harcourt-Whyte's speech is indicative that the lepers are aware and fully armed to resist anybody that would want to jeopardize their interest. This in-turn shows the dramatist's position in creating awareness for the masses and mobilizing them into taking on social structures that try to keep them down.

In the bid to throw the lepers out of the hospital, the police superintendent gives the lepers twenty four hours within which to clear from the hospital premises. This causes heavy rancour between the inmates, but Ikoli Harcourt-Whyte, being a patriotic leader and an agent of change tells the inmates that: "We shall wait! And ours shall be victory in the end. Why? Because, try as they might, bad rulers in this land shall never find strength enough to crush the people down forever" (p. 49).

Indeed, through their leader, the lepers even though handicapped, grunt, kick and weep. In the end, they are given a place of settlement of their own at Uzuakoli. This implies that the dramatist through this play creates a world where collective struggle could liberate a people from their quagmires and social change attained.

The dramatist creates Harcourt Ikoli Whyte as a selfless leader who believes in the people he represents rather than self. In a bid to buy Harcourt's conscience and make him betray his fellow inmates the superintendent says to him that:

SUP:... Let's put it this way. Nobody grows younger, you know. Somebody even the strongest wrestler in the community comes to rest his bell, and looks for a fireside: somewhere to settle in, take stock, wait the last day in peace, so to speak. Put things together. Urine that sprays about never foams. To foam, urine needs one spot to spout on...you might just want to rest, relax, no landlord to push you about. A house your own. A lump sum gratuity in addition, perhaps, and a regular monthly pension like any respectable, retired man with a meritorious service behind him... you have tried for your people I mean. All those years of self-sacrifice... (p. 76).

Ikoli Harcourt-Whyte being a just leader with the interest of his fellow inmates after hearing all the promises asks that: "what about the others: Nweke, Hannah, Court Clark, Mallam, Editor, Catechist...? (p. 77). This further pushes the superintendent into saying that:

SUP: My dear fellow, our talk is about you. Your well-being the crayfish is in your basket now. You are talking of catfish, crackers, and mud slippers still in the waters! Any way... (p. 77).

The implication of the above conversation that ensues between Harcourt-Whyte and the superintendent shows that, the oppressors will always want to have their way by whatever means they could to keep the masses down, but the dramatist through the leper creates a twist that through collective struggle and self-discipline, the masses will take up arms and dislodge the oppressors, thereby liberating themselves from the yoke of dominance.

In presenting the decayed nature of our leaders and their tendencies to keep embezzling public funds at the detriment of the poor masses whose hopes are dead, the play

resonates with hope. The superintendent who is an agent of the government regards the leper's revolt and desire for dream actualization a fruitless effort when he questions the lepers thus:

SUP:... Have you weighed the economic implications of that dream? My dear fellows, the land of Canaan in modern times doesn't flow with milk... it doesn't give off honey either. It takes money, cash. And where do you propose to get that? Not from the government, I suppose. Good intentions aside, no government ever budgets for dreams of Canaan land these days (pp. 47-48).

Extrapolating from the foregoing therefore, it is worthy of note that even though Nigeria is blessed with so many natural resources that could bring forth responsible and responsive leadership that will salvage our repugnant and repulsive society, those at the helm of affairs do not care about the people they govern but are only concerned with what goes into their foreign accounts across the world. At this juncture, let us note again that the dramatist as a catalyst for social change wants the masses to pick the cue from the collective struggle of the lepers in the play and apply it in their everyday life for the actualization of meaningful development in the country.

### Conclusion

Dramatists do not create in a vacuum; they create their works questioning the body polity and the contradictions and tensions in their respective societies and nations in general. The dramatist is part of the society and is equally aware of all the issues that retard growth and development of the society. In this wise, being a kind of sensible needle and catalyst for social change, the playwright creates works that could bring about the desired change and mobilizes the masses into taking proactive measures that will lift them out of the pit.

Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* has demonstrated the fact that our dramatists have a firm grip of the issues of our society. From the analysis of the play therefore, it could be deduced that Rotimi represents a society where collective struggle could bring about meaningful development. He also shows how the upper class in their bid to continue marginalizing the masses would do everything humanly possible to remain at the top of the social ladder as evidenced in the play when they try to bribe Harcourt-Whyte to give up the struggle, at the detriment of his fellow lepers. This shows the dramatist's conscious effort at fostering social change and the functional role of dramatic literature as an effective tool for informing, correcting, educating and mobilizing members of the society into improving and of course, questioning the *status quo*.

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