A semiotic critique of the play *Throes of Leadership* by Julie Omoifo Okoh

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Abstract

This study examines systemic presentation of leadership in Nigeria in relation to tertiary institutions, critically examining the play throes of leadership by Julie Omoifo Okoh. however we will apply the Marxist cultural enquiry principle to decipher How the playwright has used semiotic iconoclasm to represent the decline in infrastructural development in Nigeria from Shehu Shagaris democratic dispensation to Abdusalami Abubakar's military dispensation. the play describes happenings in the country during the military era and gives a vivid portrayal of the university environment under democratic leadership of Shehu Shagari when things started going bad a in the country before the coming of despotic military governments headed by Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babaingida, Sanni Abacha, when the devaluation of the naira brought about capital flight and its accompanying brain drain became the order of the day as intellectuals fled the country for fear of incarceration . The ivory towers were been run like military cantonments. The promise of an agrarian revolution promised from Obasanjo's government to Shagari's green revolution that never materialised all captured in a one hours play. The play sums up with a scientifically based oriented viable agrarian revolution as an anecdote to economic recession, self-reliance and productivity.

Winds up with the improvements experienced from the ivory towers innovation in cassava yields.

Key words: semiotics, leadership, and playwright

Introduction

The play 'Throes of leadership' written by prof. Julie Omoifo Okoh and directed by Sunday Edum was premiered as a Convocation play by the Institute of Arts and Culture (Arts Village) University of Port Harcourt on the 4th of April 2017at the university Arts Theatre The Crab. The play chronicles the numerous problems that bedevilled the Nigerian nation through the reigns of Shehu Shagari, Muhammadu Buhari and Ibrahim Babaginda rule using symbolic semiotic description of play criticism. In this play the playwright applied the semiotic method of signification to depict events as they occurred during the recessive economic situation that pervaded the nation due to the negation of due process in governance coupled with tribalism, nepotism, economic recklessness and misleading world bank directives that lead to brain drain and decline in intellectual contribution to national development. This necessitated the devaluation of the naira, which led to the recession that led to brain drain capital flight which the playwright describes using the university as a symbolic microcosm. The playwright's application of semiotic symbols clearly describes he chaotic decline of the Nigerian institutions as students unrest and workers strike became the order of the day coupled with incessant military take overs of the university system appointing military officers to run citadels of intellectualism like military cantonments. Finally we see the situation change from bad to good as intellectual research coupled with constructive criticism and dialogue come to the fore which prompts scientific application to agrarianism delivering the society from economic recession.

Summary of the play

Leadership: The play opens with the vice chancellor lamenting the challenges of leading a tertiary institution during the military era in Nigeria. The play opens with the narrator who gives a brief background of play hinting on the issues encountered by the second vice chancellor as the administrative head of the institution. ACCORDING TO Eagleton (2008, p. 8). ä Marxist cultural enquiry … represents a materialism of of a somewhat fundamentalist but none the less interesting kind … attempt to demystify idealist notions art by situating it in the context … of natural history." The play spans a period covering Shehu Shagari's democratically elected government through Buhari's military intervention to Babangida's regime when brain drain and capital flight came to its peak because of lack of maintenance, misplacement of priorities, infrastructural decay and nepotism in the Nigerian system. From the narrator we get the arguments between the modernists, Marxists, socialists' and conservatives arguing on the need to fragment the university system. The need to establish departments, appoint departmental heads, professors, and the institution of extra moral classes, establishment of the school of graduate studies, graduate seminar series which became a bastion of intellectual discourse a delight to watch the brain storming after presentations and the projection of Marxism as some lecturers even wore bathroom slippers to lectures. How the likes of Claude Ake, Ikemba Nzimiro, O. J. B. Ojo, Eton etc. wanted to turn everybody on campus to Marxists. The debates that ensued from the two camps were exhilarating as papers were presented monthly. The change of academic policies and the agitation for the fragmentation of the university system to accommodate heads of departments and deans to have separate offices were also issues of contention as class came to play a part. The narrator goes on to reveal "In the old system only the Dean had administrative office and a vote head, now the Deans of Faculties and Heads of Departments have separate offices and vote heads" (p.5).

Thereafter the we came to the first scene where a senate meeting is in session in the vice chancellors office, provosts, deans, registrar and

members of senate deliberate over the problems confronting the smooth runn9ng of the institution ranging from lack of research grants, poor remuneration, lack of class room space, over congestion, light, water, and office space, lack of funds to carry on research, lack of laboratory equipment/materials basic infrastructure, hostel space for students, etc. led to a heated debate at the senate session. The wife of the vice chancellor comes in at intervals representing gender balance trying to impress on her husband her need for a car to take her to town and source funds for her pet project giving an impression of the state of roads in town. Some of the members impress on the vice chancellor to resign as he cannot manage the situation. The narrator presents the issue of the vice chancellors resignation an auditory means to signify students protest through the use of drums, songs and chants singing of solidarity songs. They want to see their vice chancellor. The vice chancellor in his office inset as the chairmen and members of ASU come to impress their position of happenings in the institution as reflected in their campus paper and their demand that the vice chancellor resigns. And that their publications are not the cause of the incisive situation on the campus but prevailing social circumstances. The vice chancellor narrates how he became the vice chancellor and his achievements from 1972, 1978 to 1980 when he became director of history studies, and now how the academic staff union is insisting on his resignation.

Asu chairman: like every other person you have a weak point. Some people are taking undue advantage of it and lord it over others.

Vice chancellor: O ye children of jezebel! Always full of bite! Complaints! Complaints all the time.

Deputy vice chancellor: the people you are talking about are they members of ASUU?

Asuu chairman: yes, they are. But, they consider themselves as the chosen ones. Just because of their special relationship with the vice chancellor (Throes, p. 20).

The vice chancellor understands their view that familiarity breeds contempt but in governance those on the corridors of power constitute administrative bottleneck because of their relationship with sources of power which is the bane of the Nigerian state up till this point in time. Vice chancellor in his office discussing with the head of department and the deputy vice chancellor about the current promotion guidelines and how some staff are not happy because they feel oppressed or blocked from having their doctorate degree and the wrangling's surrounding the award of doctorate degrees in the university. How some deans play god whomsoever they supervise even if the person is not intellectually sound he must get the doctorate degree. But if they dislike your face or hear anything about you they constitute themselves a stumbling block on your way, which is the cause of intellectual decay in our Ivory Towers.

The students want to see their vice chancellor but the deputy vice chancellor constitutes himself a stumbling block that he can handle their demands as the vice chancellor obliged him the students seeing him get more agitated and destroy some school properties and were penalized and fined some money. They pay the fine and in order to make some money in funding and infrastructural development as government funding has started dwindling so he invests the money in a commercial bank. This was when the banks were closed for flimsy reasons by the military. There after the narrator comes in again exposes the issues of inflation, brain drain, collapse of the university system lamenting the days when foreign lecturers were in their numbers in the institution and their contributions to a vibrant academic environment.

The vice-chancellor is in his office brooding over the current situation with the two vice chancellors as they discuss the issues plaguing the university. They impress his achievements on him as they discuss the series of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASU) publications and their contents. They report also about the student's unrest no water, light, and the vice chancellor is advised by the deputy vice chancellor to see the students and address them directly but another advices him he can handle

the situation. These scenarios still obtains in our tertiary institutions till date as the recalcitrant military has now worn civilian garb to unleash same blind recourse to the socio-economic development of education which is the pivot of national development.

Then the narrator comes on stage and reports about the students unrest we hear the students at a distance singing solidarity songs without seeing them here the director made a good use of off stage emphasis and it is very effective before the narrator leaves and the scene begins as the students demand to see their vice chancellor but the deputy vice chancellor tries to stop them and intercede they insists on seeing their vice chancellor and march into the vice chancellors office trampling all within sight under their foot . black out

Senate meeting the deans and heads of department accuse the vice chancellor of wrongfully investing university funds without following due process, arguments ensue some take sides with the vice chancellor over the success of his past investments while others ask him to resign his appointment. From which point we see the vice chancellor sleeping in his office soliloquising while contemplating resignation. The deputy vice chancellor academics comes in and encourages the vice chancellor, reminds him of the issues of currency devaluation, brain drain, which ignites the vice chancellors remembering his Biafra days, the symbolic use of flash back to represent series of events that have occurred outside the text.

Thereafter the vice chancellor was advised by the deputy vice chancellor academics to experiment with agriculture, and then the vice chancellors wife comes in and tells him of her recent achievements. they begin to sing songs of praise, he is a great provider, you are marvellous, what a marvellous god, in the course of their jubilations a knock comes on the door and women from the three communities surrounding the university tome in with singing to thank the on the success of his experiment with farming and fish pond, poultry as futuristic statement of an agricultural revolution. The vice chancellor wife suggests a child's and handicap centre for the university which the vice chancellor accepts as the

community women continue their songs of praise congratulating the vice chancellor for his successes and the play ends in a happy note.

Playwright: Thematic analysis the play leadership is centred round the issue of leadership in tertiary institutions and the problems associated with it. The central theme reflects clearly in the theme song of the play "to be a vice chancellor is not an easy job." The thematic thrust of the play throes of leadership is reflected everywhere in government and in institutional; leadership is not an easy job. What is experienced in the ivory towers is what obtains in the larger society. The values placed on the educational sector by the Nigerian state, government priority is not on the development of the educational sector as the universities experienced a dearth in funding, infrastructural decay as government officials begin to send their children abroad embezzling funds meant for infrastructural development at was at this point that the vice chancellor was appointed to lead the university.

Lecturers are complaining of a lack of teaching aids, no funds for research, salaries are not paid on time and as at when due, coupled with lack of steady light electricity, water which leads the students to be involved in the crisis. The issues of capital flight , brain drain, international scholars returning to their home countries and elsewhere, devaluation of the Nigerian currency where also themes that were addressed in the course of the paly. The reversal to agriculture brings about a reinvigoration of the harsh economic situation as human capacity development is improved through agricultural activities as neighbouring communities cue in to the universities agrarian programme, new cassava species with good yield is developed by the university , poultry and animal husbandry improved to enhance an agrarian revolution.

Directing, Design, technical costume make-up and lighting

The directing was well defined as the director for the sake of time collapsed some scenes using the role of a narrator to relay these scenes especially situation 1,3,6,9 and 12 were all subjected to the symbolic use of the narrator

to present those scenes. The set restricted too much movement and set changes. All movements were restricted to the vice chancellors office to save ample time. The set also made the play timely as there were no set changes and set movements. The lighting was simple except for the use of flash back scenes where some parts of the stage was left bare while action occurred on only one side of the stage. Blackout was used to delineate scene changes, while songs were used to create alight atmosphere to occupy the attention of the audience during scene changes. The costumes were reasonable and realistic. Make –up was effective as the make –up of the characters reflected the faces of the original characters represented in this unique dramatic experience.

From what was seen the play throes of leadership gives a semiotic description of a given category of cultural phenomena of the historical event which is covered by the plays time span. The play reflects a microcosm of significant happenings in the university system in Nigeria as a whole from Shehu Shagaris government to the military regimes of Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babaginda era. The symbolic use of the University of Port Harcourt as a representation of this social malady that plunged the country to recession is commendable. The question arises what is semiotics? According to Eagleton, (2008, p. 87) semiotics or semiology, means the systematic study of signs, and this is what literary structuralist's are really doing. As a literary study structuralism as a method of inquiry can be applied to critic a whole range of objects from football matches to economic modes of production. The play structurally depicts the affairs of governance and how tribalism, nepotism has reflected in the affairs of the university as shown by the playwright in the dialogue between the ASU chairman and the vice chancellor. Those at the corridors of power and their negating influence are experienced in the appointment of non-professionals to run government agencies because they are friends, brothers and religious adherents. Thus we see those with certificates and those without certificates supervising and superintending over government agencies and even being appointed to administer universities as experienced under Buhari's

government which led to the nose dive of the country's institutions. It continued up to Babaingidas, Abacha and even Abusalami's government. When national affairs and governance was characterized with tribalism, nepotism, despotism, caution was thrown to the wind as round pegs were put in square holes which brought about a decline in the gross domestic product of the state leading to capital flight, brain drain and poor funding of tertiary institutions.

Personal assessment of the play: the play uses simple straight forward language and is structured in situations revealing various periods of the socio-economic decay and educational developments in the Nigerian state. To semioticians like Barthes (41), "a plays' language includes all those systems from which we can select and combine elements in order to communicate." (as cited in Graeme 1993, 9. 41). Okoh achieves these forms in selecting and combing costumes, make-up, sound, music props in order to communicate the plays intended meaning to an audience. This the playwright achieves creatively because in this period the educational sector in the Nigerian state suffered brain drain, international scholars that were ever present in the Nigerian state returned to their various countries because of the devaluation of the naira, inflation sky rocketed to an unbearable level it was difficult to pay salaries of university staff, lack of infrastructure, no light, water which led to students unrest the caging of the banking sector and the introduction of the structural adjustment policy which was a neo-colonial approach to cultural imperialism were all symbolised through a descriptive semiotic approach in this play by professor Julie Omoifio Okoh. The playwright approaches the play from the semiotic angle as the play uses descriptive symbolization to represent salient historical facts from the VC's, point of view to reflect the civil war (Biafra), years. The discipline of semiotic plays an important role in structuralising literary theory and cultural studies. Semiotics apply structuralisms insights to the study of sign systems, a non-linguistic object of behaviour that can be analysed as it were a language.

Prior to this time in Europe Students unrest had also occurred in the late 60's as (Eagleton, 2008, p.123) observes that ''in 1968… students movement had swept across Europe, striking against the authoritarianism of the educational institutions and in France briefly threatening the capitalist state itself''. The way non-linguistic objects tell us something. For example use of a military man, photograph, army uniforms, bills boards that is how the playwright has used symbolic description to portray a silent historical fact of lack of leadership in the Nigerian political space.

The issues that confronted Nigerians the first twenty five years (1960-1985), are still with Nigerians in the next twenty five years (1985-2005). The nation still 'mismanaged', her wealth is still being misappropriated by the 'ruling class'. The issues of development , the areas from which 'scenarios' are expected remain as follows: the Nigerian polity; public sector administration; economic planning and implementation,; health and human service delivery; agriculture and rural sector; industrial sector; education; technological development; public finance; government relations with the organised business sector, emergency and disaster administration; the environment; communication and development; foreign policy and defence (Uka, p. 6).

These problems enumerated above are mostly captured in the play. The playwright also proffers solutions to the lingering socio-economic problems of the Nigerian society as a result of misplacement of priority. But here she describes scientific application of agriculture as the panacea to the ailing economic problems as Rusom's experiment in the improvement of the cassava plant has improved the yield of cassava production of the neighbouring communities which has prompted them to come and thank the vice chancellor as their Garri has now become the talk of the town. Fish ponds, poultry, and farming have all helped to ease the harsh economic condition felt by the women. To Eagleton (2008, p.101), in relation to the above mentioned text "the sign/symbolic use of agriculture was to be seen less as affixed unit like signal than an active component of speech , modified

and transformed in meaning by the variable social tones, valuations and connotations it condensed within itself in specific social conditions."

The play wright descriptively symbolizes agrarian revolution as the sure means of easing economic recession that will eventually lead to self-reliance and sustenance. And women are the very objects of this humanistic exercise. But Kristeva looks to this semiotic language used by the playwright in this reflexive exercise thus

> 'Language' of the semiotic as a means of undermining the symbolic order … the relatively secure means of ordinary language are harassed and disrupted by this flow of signification , which presses the linguistic sign to its extreme limit … it is opposed to all fixed , transcendental significations, and since the ideologies of modern male dominated class society rely on such fixed signs for their power … such literature becomes a kind of equivalent in the realm of language to revolution in the sphere of politics." (as cited in Eagleton, 2008, 163-164).

The language system of a culture carries that cultures system of priorities, its specific set of values, and its specific composition of the physical and social world." If the Nigerian people replicate the symbolic approach symbolised by the playwright in the play Throes of leadership, Nigeria would one day be like Malaysia and other developing countries that have moved from third world countries through developing agriculture.

Conclusion

The play has creatively through the use of symbolic language presented the current problems of the Nigerian state as the issue of leadership and educational myopic reasoning which has brought about misplacement of priorities. Uka (2011, p. 3), sums up the creative and investigative nature of the playwrights contribution to social reengineering thus

> Literature people are 'socializers' and 'eavesdroppers'. Their intellectual temperament is to juggle ideas from

> both inside and outside of the action lines of national politics, international business, contemporary commerce, intrinsic cultures and modern industry. The careers of most post 1986 writers depict this.

The issue of leadership the playwright has treated with a symbolic paradigm, crisscrossing the era of a civilian government and three military regimes also reflecting on the Nigerian civil war, the precursor to all these developments. If Nigerian leaders can neglect religion, tribalism and nepotism and dialogue band recognise achievements of past regimes only reworking where they have failed, acknowledging their successes and improving on them, then and only then can the country attain self-reliance. Thus we see the playwright s solution in the play reverting to our traditional means of livelihood with application of modern technology where necessary by enshrining an agro based economy as exemplified in the vice chancellors innovations the country will move from dependency to economic independence based on sustainable human capacity development. What the country needs now is funding education that will drive a full blown industrial revolution hinged on agriculture.

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