

AN ANALYSIS OF THEATRE AS A VEHICLE FOR PROTEST IN NIGERIA USING SOJI COLE'S *MAYBE TOMORROW*

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Abstract

*Theatre over the years has been an efficient tool for the propagation of ideas and opinions. The flexibility of theatre as a tool endears it to the heart of many people. In pre-colonial Nigeria era, theatre exemplified itself as an efficacious platform for protest to counter domination and subjugation efforts by the British colonisers against Nigerians as evidenced in the works of Hubert Ogunde and other theatre artistes of the era. It is against this background that this paper interrogates Soji Cole's play *Maybe Tomorrow* with a fresh perspective which has not been specifically looked at before, to unravel how it functions as a platform of protest within the circumference of contemporary Nigerian situations. Using the qualitative research approach which entails documentary observation method, content analysis and the reader-response theoretical framework, this paper examines the play under study as a vehicle for protest in Nigeria. It is realised in this paper that protest theatre is an important kind of theatre that fosters social growth as exemplified in the playtext *Maybe Tomorrow*. Therefore playwrights should try to embed social messages in their plays based on the valuable contributions to the society that such messages offer.*

Keywords: Theatre, Protest, Society, Nigeria, Militants

Introduction

Theatre as an artistic field has over the years proven to be a flexible and yet potent tool that can be used in the society to achieve numerous goals. Everybody can use theatre and it is available to people as close to them as their bodies. The agency of the human body is an integral resource for theatre. Among the several goals that theatre can achieve is its capacity to function as an efficient platform for protest in the society. Theatre has and continues to be used by several people as a launch pad for criticisms and protest against issues and happenings in the society. Chidiebere Ekweariri and Nnamdi Mbara (170) note that:

Over the years, different forms of agitation, expressions of bitterness, and feelings of angst against dehumanization and maltreatment have taken centre stage in Nigeria, often manifesting in the form of protest/street theatre. Issues of national and collective importance have agitated people's minds leading to the resolve to challenge the status quo.

Theatre does not only accept the tabling of issues in the society on its back. Through a mechanism that allows it to affect the emotions of people, it also functions as an agent of rebuttal that makes it effective as a tool. This capacity of theatre is not restricted to Nigerian situation only. Scholars Anas S. Ahmad and Rizwan M. Khan opine that, "Theatre has long served as a powerful medium for registering dissent against injustice and oppression" (32). It should be stated that the evident reason why theatre continues to be used as a veritable tool through the years is due to its efficiency in delivery.

Soji Cole's *Maybe Tomorrow* functions and exists as a repository of knowledge, ideas and arguments. Due to the fact that the playwright gets his materials from the society, the things that are portrayed in plays often depict what can be obtainable in the society. The play *Maybe Tomorrow* represents a rich source of information that reflects the disturbing challenges faced by the people of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. Despite the efforts by the Nigerian government to address these issues so far, the challenging problems continue to persist. Therefore the play possesses important issues that deserve analysis and interrogation to understand and decipher long-term possible way outs for the nation concerning these issues.

The issues and socio-economic conditions that Cole's *Maybe Tomorrow* interrogates are serious and important; however there have been few critical oeuvres from the observation of the researchers, who wrote this paper, after dissecting the play, particularly towards the angle of observing the text as a promoter of the theatre as a platform for protest. This paper is an effort towards reiterating the importance of the play and the contribution it offers to the growth and development of Nigeria.

The Role of Theatre in the Society

From the time of Wole Soyinka which began around the early 1950's with the publication of his plays full of public appeal, up until this contemporary time with the existence of playwrights such as Soji Cole, Obari Gomba, Olubunmi Familoni and others, who have inherited playwriting tradition in Nigeria and are currently championing the field, Nigerian playwrights have used plays to lampoon issues in the society and bare their thoughts on policy directions in Nigeria and other fundamental challenges that bedevil the Nigerian state. Cole exemplifies the discussion of important societal issues and matters through the platform of theatre using the instrumentality of the play. Playwriting is a critical theatre component that occupies a poignant position in the theatre. Without the play, no directing can take place. Every play performance is only the physical realisation of the play. Therefore what the audience often sees enacted on the stage is the manifestation of the thinking of the playwright. Thus the play functions as the written directives given to the director to go and actualise in the theatre establishment. Eziwho Emenike Azunwo states that:

A play is a creative and artistic letter composed by the supposed conscience of the theatre, first and foremost to the director, actors and other members of the production crew, informing them of his current ideological standpoint, vision and positive commitment to the development of his society. The supposed conscience of the theatre

weaves the society of his play through: plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle (3).

The assertion above, clearly explains the fact that the play is an important element in the theatre and, therefore it invariably greatly contributes to the phenomenal responsibility that the theatre carries out in the society, by being a potent tool for the analysis of issues in the society. Martin Meisel gives a broad understanding of what a play entails. He views his understanding of the meaning of the play through the configuration that understands it as action that occurs within the theatre, on stage encompassing the essence and nature actions that carry meaning through the agency of performers pretending to be someone besides who they really are. He notes that:

...pieces written to be put on stage by persons in dress-ups pretending to be not themselves for the entertainment of other persons out for a good time were in nature unserious, all 'play'... all art and imagination, however charged with weighty tasks like forming the self and provisioning the well-being of society, for which they are indispensable, are in their deepest nature play (viii).

Therefore from the quotation above we can see that play occupies an integral part of the human life and it documents the issues and challenges that face societies. It serves as a conduit through which messages and meanings are passed across to people and it helps emphasise the function of theatre as an efficient platform for the analysis of societal issues.

Theatre has an important function that it carries out in society. Considering that theatre has been in existence since the beginning of man, it is evident that theatre is closely related to man. Theatre serves as the mirror of the society. What people can see happening in the society, can be portrayed in the theatre. Therefore, this means that theatre carries out a social function. Ahmadova Gulkhara and Elza Farzaliyeva state that theatre has historically functioned as a medium for reflecting social values, conflicts, and transformations. From its earliest forms, dramatic performance has provided commentary on political, moral, and ethical dilemmas, often influencing public perception and shaping cultural narratives (255).

The efficacy and long-term knowledge of theatre as a medium for the propagation of messages that affect the society is evident. This is especially in connection to the assertion above. Sheeba Azhar and Syed AbidAli reveal another dimension of the manner in which the functionality of theatre as a tool in the society manifests. Theatre works like a balm that helps to solidify the understanding of humans and the relationship that exists between them. Azhar and Ali note that:

The theatre is a social institution. Through its activities people meet and interact...The theatre reflects the social relationships of its times. It might be said with justification that the theatre is an art of social relationships. More than any other art form, it concerns itself with the ways in which people interact (238 – 239).

The assertion by the scholars above endeavours to emphasize the nature of theatre as one that honours interpersonal relationship. These literatures exemplify the several functions of theatre as an art form that is reflective of the society.

Efficacy of Theatre as a Platform for Protest in the Society

Among other things, due to the fact that theatre is an effective platform for the dissemination of discourses and the dissection of issues in the society, theatre also functions as a platform for protest. According to Josiah Adewale Apalowo and Maharanny Setiawan Poetri:

Theatre is a means of communicating ideas and emotions to the society in form of live performances...protest theatre which can also be seen from the perspective of theatre for collective struggle, theatre for emancipation, revolutionary theatre, the theatre for social change, theatre of the oppressed to mention but few. Protest theatre can be referred to as a theatre that is utilised to fight political and economic inequalities and social ills (46).

Theatres of different types coalesce into what generally can be described as protest theatre. The quote above essentially explained that any theatre that is for the people, fighting against the oppression of the people culminates into a protest theatre. This research argues with the perspective of interpreting protest theatre in this way because it gives a very broad and yet concise outline of what kinds of theatre can be read as protest theatre. Pushpa Sundar asserts that:

The term 'Protest theatre' is often used as a synonym for political theatre, but it has a wider scope. Socially concerned theatre may raise consciousness about social ills for which individuals, and not the state, may be collectively responsible, thus, it may not be aimed at political authority at all (123).

Generally, political theatre is related to protest theatre because of their penchant for working towards the same kind of goals in the nature that they exist. Thus in this study when protest theatre is mentioned, reference is also made to a political kind of theatre that speaks the minds of the people and centralises the wants and needs of the mass populace.

Theatre is not only functional as a tool that can be used to present, analyse and dissect issues in the society, but it is also an efficient and durable tool in the society which highlights its esteemed functionality. Carmen Haisan notes that theatre, the most visible form of art, in the context in which it includes all the other arts, is an instrument with huge adaptability, which can always be shaped according to the social and cultural vision in which it is consumed (180).

The efficacy of theatre as a tool in the society for the propagation of issues and challenges is evident in the fact of the adaptability feature it has amongst other thing. Theatre can be used in different terrains, managed within different budget rates, and used under diverse weather conditions. This flexibility and adaptability quality of the theatre, highlights its effectiveness as a tool that is capable of achieving the responsibility that is thrust on it. Matiza asserts that:

The functionality of theatre is no longer in doubt, as many people have come to realize the potency of theatre in development...theatre functions as a tool for conscientization. Through this people are made aware of their predicament and are able to identify and analyse them towards finding solutions (54).

Historically, the trait of theatre highlighted above has been known with the theatre, and this medium of art continues to show capacity and effectiveness in carrying out the responsibility of representing the society including serving as a platform for protest. Apalowo and Poetri opine that protest theatre are most times used to sensitise and encourage the masses to combat anti-humane policy of policy-makers such as government officials, religious leaders, economic leaders, to mention but few through an artistic work which can either be textual or performative art (48).

Protest Theatre is a theatre that is used to sensitise and inform the people in the society about the things that they ought to know as citizens and members of the society. The assertion above provides insights into what protest theatre entails, thereby revealing how it relates to this study as the focus of this paper.

Summary of Soji Cole's *Maybe Tomorrow*

The play *Maybe Tomorrow* by Soji Cole was published in 2013 by the Kraft Books Limited. The play tells the story of two long-lost friends, Adolphus Wariboko and Kenule Ododo. These two friends fought on the federal side against the rebel forces during the Nigerian civil war. They maimed, destroyed and committed all manners of atrocities all in the name of defending national interest in efforts to make the country united. With the singular purpose and common ideal for a united country, the two friends believe that there's no alternative to Nigeria remaining together as one indivisible country. Anybody or group of persons against the unity of the country becomes an enemy that must not only be silenced, but annihilated. In oneness, they fought to make Nigeria overrun her enemy, the civil war rebels.

However after the war, the two friends part ways and moved on to other things to survive. While Wariboko finds solace with the Nigeria Police Force, Ododo pitches tent with his people in a militia group, Coastal Fighter Group (CFG), to agitate for better living conditions for his riverine people, who are left with tales of woes in oil spillages, devastated rivers and farmlands and ill health resulting from oil exploration by foreign corporations granted licenses to operate by the state that does nothing to protect the hapless communities.

Years after the civil war, the two friends meet again in circumstances that pitch them at two opposite sides of the divide: a police interrogation room, with one being the suspect for kidnapping two foreign oil workers and the other being the interrogating police officer. While Wariboko represents the government that interrogates Ododo, whose CFG is alleged to have kidnapped two oil workers, the duo come to the realisation that the civil war was a waste of their youthful days as the ideals the war promoted are unrealistic, a waste of life and human resources; that indeed they had been sold a lie.

Although this common truth makes them redefine their viewpoints and philosophical outlook about life, it also helps to further divide them. With a determination to carry out the biddings of their respective standpoints as policeman and a rebel who must confront the government to face up to its responsibilities, Wariboko interrogates Ododo to make him admit to a crime he knows nothing about. Even the dire consequences of torture should Ododo fails to reveal the whereabouts of the missing men is thrown in for good measure. Just at the point when Wariboko almost strangles Ododo to death for failing to give him relevant information on the kidnapping the true identity of the kidnappers is revealed and the play ends.

The Nature of Protest Theatre in Soji Cole's *Maybe Tomorrow*

Soji Cole's play is embedded with several messages that are geared towards the betterment of the Nigerian society and particularly the growth and development of the Niger Delta Communities that are at the crux of the discussions in the playtext. One of the firm messages that are highlighted in the *Maybe Tomorrow* is the directives of the playwright that are channelled towards emphasising that the Nigerian people and particularly the Niger Delta people deserve development. Development does not emanate from the leaders only, but must have the people co-opted into the development plan otherwise such a development effort risks losing sustainability and longevity. In the play, the characters reckon that:

- AW:** Kenule, you need to be civil in your agitations!
- KO:** It is he government who must listen to the voice of the people!
- AW:** There are too many voices to listen to! The government cannot listen to everyman on the streets. The transformation can only happen gradually.
- KO:** (Mimicking) "The government cannot listen to everyman on the streets"... I never said they should, but let them take a man from the streets and listen to his heart. That will be the resonance with which the suffering of our people can be measured. (pg. 14)

When people's suffering "can be measured" then that says a lot about the nature of development that can be channelled towards such a society. Here in the passage about which is an excerpt from the play *Maybe Tomorrow*, the character Kenule Ododo (KO) a civil war veteran, and now the leader of a Niger Delta militant group expresses his anger and discontent to Adolphus Wariboko (AW) also a civil war veteran, now a Nigeria police officer, about the pain and struggle that the people go through. When AW expresses that the government cannot listen to everyone, KO emphasises that everyone cannot be listened to on the streets but if the heart of one man can be listened to genuinely, then it can serve as an eye-opener to what so many people want and yearn for. Being a police officer, AW serves as a symbol of government presence highlighted in the play. Therefore the expression that KO utters to AW is a communication of the plight of people who want their hearts listened to so that their cry can be listened to.

Many people fail to remember often that a people governed can never be successfully pummelled into sustainable long-lasting followership. Long-lasting leadership success is best achieved by way of being a good example to people especially as they are followers that basically thrive on the pattern and direction with which they are being led. In *Maybe Tomorrow*, the essence of good leadership is exemplified as a catalyst for how the followers behave. In the conversation between KO and AW, this is quite evident when Kenule decries that:

- KO:** There is nothing new about the government. It is old wine in a new bottle. They carry the regimented values of the old politicians.
- AW:** Our anger will do nothing to move the country forward. We must support the government.
- KO:** Yes we must, but first, I must support my people.... I must tell you that a mistake is committed by mistake. I supported the government once by killing my own people in a senseless war! I regretted it because the same government turned me into an outcast with poverty written all over my forehead. (pg. 12)

The excerpt above from *Maybe Tomorrow* portrays the lack of good leadership example from the government, who now demands for a good and responsible followership from the people. It is therefore a case of deep and concentrated irony, which certainly cannot birth a straightforward result. It is a case of one who is pouring water into a basket and yet expects that he has stored water.

To succinctly put it, the nature of protest theatre in Soji Cole's *Maybe Tomorrow* is moulded in the way that such theatres are known or can be identified. This means that it is a theatre of agitation and revolt. A theatre that features anger, discontent and dissection as some of the traits that are displayed by the people that dominates it. The agitation and expression of discontent that dominate this theatre is not as a result of mere recalcitrant behaviour but a disagreement with the

system that dominates a society which prioritises the suffering and neglect of the people, above their welfare. Sundar brings this perspective into the understanding of what protest theatre entails when he states that:

The term “Protest theatre” is often used as a synonym for political theatre, but it has a wider scope. Socially concerned theatre may raise consciousness about social ills for which individuals, and not the state, may be collectively responsible; thus, it may not be aimed at political authority at all... (123).

Although a discourse on protest theatre has already been made in the segment on discussion of literatures in this study, it is important that it is brought up here again to understand the nature of protest theatre in the play under study. The quote above succinctly and rightly says that protest theatre is not only about being political and attacking the government, but sometimes it is between humans because after all, man is a political being. Politics is engraved into the life and existence of man. In the play under study, the reader can deduce that the problem of anger and protest that KO has, is not only channelled towards the government but also personally towards AW who is evidently a stooge of the political oppressors:

AW: You talk as if I work as an errand boy! I am only doing my duty to my nation.

KO: Your duty, yes! But once you wear the garment of a thief, you become a thief; there's no honourable thief. (pg. 13)

KO explicitly lets AW realise his anger towards him and this exemplifies the protest theatre. It is not a theatre of violence, or a theatre of peace. It is a theatre that demands that noise must be made and thus it must be made to attract relevant attention and focus and redirect attention to the demands that the theatre makes. Cole's *Maybe Tomorrow* achieves this by exemplifying the nature of the protest theatre.

Suggestions for Societal Growth in Soji Cole's *Maybe Tomorrow*

One of the social messages embedded in the play *Maybe Tomorrow* is the negativity of war and how it destroys societies and cause untold hardships on people. These negatives of the effects of war are often times avoidable in the view of the fact that honest and open-minded conversations can lead to the avoidance of most of these wars. This is true particularly as it concerns the Nigerian civil war, which is the war referred to in the play. The Nigerian civil war which lasted from 1967 – 1970 has been described by some people as unwarranted and is said to have happened based on the selfish desires of the Nigerian leaders of that time who did not see or care to see the catastrophic effect that going into war between people that have for a long-time lived together can have on the psyche of the people. In the play KO says:

KO: ... A.S.P. Wariboko, have you forgotten? Has time erased the memories of war from your head? The suffering? The hunger? The trauma of killing our own people?...I don't blame you, Adolphus. I could have been part of it; I could have done it too ... that frail girl ... her breast defiantly upright – never been breached by the perilous hands of men. You took her to the bush, muffled her strength and forcefully took her. She couldn't resist because you had knocked her off (pg. 15& 16).

These realities highlighted above are some of the atrocities that are obtainable in the time of war, and the playwright emphasises on them in a bid to portray the negativity of war and thus to advocate against it.

Soji Cole's play under study emphasises that there is need for good government in the society, if the society and indeed the nation at large is to be channelled towards growth. Societal growth does not only benefit the people, but it also benefits the leaders. The leaders can have peace of mind when they know that the people are not actively looking for ways to initiate the downfall but are instead focused on hoping for the best for their leaders. Unity has also been captured in the play under study, to be a key factor that is necessary for societal growth. There is no society that can develop and grow with its people in the struggle against the unending exploitation of their land and the denigration of the people into slavery, penury and excruciating lack (pg. 14). The government ought to listen to the people and know what they want because the voice of the people is the voice of unison.

It is important to guarantee equal opportunity for all citizens irrespective of their social connections or their position on the social ladder in a society or a country that wants to grow and develop. However we can glean from numerous data repository for news and events that happen in Nigeria to know that that is not the cause. This is therefore a stumbling block in the part of growth of the country. KO in the play states thus:

KO: Tell me, what has the government done for you?

AW: What have you done for the country?

KO: This country doesn't belong to me. I used to think that the country belongs to all those who have made it their home; but no, it belongs only to a few. A registered few who have made it a hell for other.... (pg. 19)

Sadly the situation painted in the excerpt below is the state of this in Nigeria and worse, in the Niger Delta, based on what the playwright knows.

Few people continue to swim in wealth and affluence while majority of the others swallow in putrid soul-crushing poverty and lack. This inequality continues to breed violence and anger in the society especially in the Niger Delta region. This then limits growth and development in the society. Therefore the playwright advises that if any meaningful progress would be made in the Nigerian society, these issues of inequality have to be firmly addressed.

Conclusion

The focus of this study hinges on interrogating the social essence and relevance that protest theatre exemplifies, using the play under study as a paradigm. From the analysis done so far, certain issues have been raised and these issues have been discussed. Soji Cole's *Maybe Tomorrow* is a repository of social messages that are geared towards making the society a better place. The play portrays the playwright as a socially conscious writer, who is not only concerned about the creative process alone, but also interested in ensuring that he uses his creativity to contribute to the growth and development of the society in which he exists. The nature of protest theatre as a politically charged kind of theatre has also been highlighted in this analysis that has been done. Theatre does not only function as an avenue for entertainment but can also be a strong tool of enlightenment and education and this play under study has highlighted this clearly.

Theatre does not only function as an avenue for entertainment but can also be a strong tool of enlightenment and education and this play under study has highlighted this clearly. This is also one of the key essences of a play. To be able to offer suggestions that can be helpful for societal growth, otherwise one can then ask what the essence of writing a play is if no good can be offered to the society through the instrumentality of the play. Therefore the analysis that have been done on this play have all been engaged in, to coalesce them into explaining very clearly the essence and entire understanding of what the protest theatre entails. The analysis also sought to emphasise the need for playwrights to always be conscious of the essence of their craft as an avenue for continuous societal orientation and re-orientation.

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