

THEMES AND MORAL LESSONS IN A NIGERIAN TRAGIC DRAMA: A STUDY OF STELLA OYEDEPO'S *DOOM IN THE DIMES*

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Abstract

The medieval era saw the creation of a kind of drama known as morality play which aimed to teach moral lessons. One outstanding example of morality play still extant is *Everyman* which was written by anonymous author. In the play, *the protagonist*, Everyman learns that everything material he has gained in life deserts him as he journeys into the valley of death. Elizabethan writer, Christopher Marlowe also relied heavily upon this genre of drama for his play, *The Tragic History of Doctor Faustus*. Since the debut of morality play, many plays across the ages and across the world on moral themes and lessons have been written. Morality play continues to exert an influence in the theatre especially in Nigeria where there is an increasingly falling standard of high morality. Against the background of surviving medieval works and heritage of morality plays, this study X-rays *Doom in the Dimes*, a tragedy written by Stella Oyedepo in 1997, focusing on the main themes and moral lessons. A textual analysis research method is used. The paper draws heavily on Tolstoy's radical moralist theory which deals explicitly with the positive moral effect of artwork on its audience. The research finding reveals that, there are indeed, valuable moral lessons that could be learned from the play text such as: "ill-gotten wealth brings retribution"; "we should not be enticed by big spenders because we do not know the source of their money"; "patience and hard work will be solidly rewarded"; "you should be content with what you have got"; "people should not be envious of each other"; "money is the root of evil and that the love of money often leads to regret". These and more lessons are capable of bringing about the desired social change in Nigeria. It is hoped that this paper will serve as one of the platforms of tackling societal vices especially bloodshed, corruption and ill-gotten wealth acquired by fraud, robbery or ritual which is prevalent in our society today.

Keywords: Themes, Morality, Tragedy, Radical Moralism Theory, Oyedepo's *Doom in the Dimes*

Introduction

The *Encarta Dictionary* defines the word morality in perspective of a noun as "a valuable lesson", and plural as "the Principle of right and wrong". According to Ozumba G.O. (2008:16) "Ethics (morality) deals with judgment as to the righteousness or wrongness, virtuous or vicious, desirability or undesirability, approval or disapproval of our actions". For the purpose of this paper, therefore, morality may be comprehensively defined to mean the proceeds or moral lessons drawn from a study or play.

It is instructive to note that dramatic text be it tragedy or comedy plays crucial role in imparting moral lessons to any given society. Moral lessons are quite essential and important to every member of any given society. Stressing the significance of moral and ethnic values, Ukuma and Nnachi (2003:277) opine that, "Moonlight gathering and festivals provided informal classroom for both adult and the young who were reminded of standards of behavior or taught afresh in the case of the young people". St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas cited in Ukuma and Nnachi (2003:278) earlier stated that, "biblical virtues as humility, self-control, kindness, fidelity, faith and hope above all love are fundamental moral and ethical values".

Ethics (morality) is as old as any society within which it is expressed. Achebe (1985) avers that:

In Africa for instance, the ancestors control the use of property, the relations of the sexes and the attitude of children to their parents. The community, which depended on the favour of the spirit and living dead, assigned each member his role and way of behavior. The stoics for instance, relied for their ethical conduct on experience, on common sense (they greatly valued the so called “golden rule”) and on Logos-reason by which natural laws could be formed and followed (P. 2).

In contemporary society such as ours, theatre has always been used not only as form of visual entertainment but also as moral education. For instance, *Tales by Moonlight*, a Nigerian folk tales dramatized by members of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) writers’ workshop since the 1980s to date is a good example of morality drama. It is important to note that stories in morality plays are selected by playwrights either because they preserve the culture of a people or because they have a strong central point, that is a moral lesson which people can learn from such as “don’t steal”, “don’t be promiscuous”, “don’t be cruel” (Barber, 1977:191). Taking a look further on some of the drama series in *Tales by Moonlight*, for instance, the theme of the drama, *Why the Tortoise has no Hair*, is “greed”, and the lesson being that greed can lead one to dangerous consequences. In the drama of *Vegetable Child*, the theme is “anger and pride” and the lesson being that anger and pride can sometimes make us do some very careless things, in short anger and pride can lead us into serious trouble. In *The Proud Beauty*, “pride” is also seen or presented as the theme of the drama, while the moral lesson being that where there is pride, there will always be a fall. Similarly, in the drama of *Famine in the Animal Kingdom*, the theme of “greed” is projected. Due to insatiability, the Tortoise does not want to share what he has with someone else. The Lesson here is that when you eat alone you die alone. In The drama of *The Stubborn Child*, as it is titled, the theme centers on “stubbornness”. It is often said that “a stupid fly that follows the corpse into a grave gets buried with it”. Stubbornness can lead one into disobedience and the lessons here is that to be stubborn is to risk one’s life and for the wise, one word is enough. *The Missing Necklace*, harmers on the theme of “stealing”, while the lesson being that, stealing is bad and punishment awaits a thief. The theme of the drama of *The Covetous King* (1996) is “jealousy” while the moral lesson is “love your neighbour as yourself, or do to others as you want others to do to you”. In the drama of *The Braggart* (1996), the theme is on “charitability” while the lesson here is that irrespective of one’s position, he should be able to help or be generous to others for he may also need help someday. Remember, it is often said that one good turn deserves another.

Methodology

This paper considers textual analysis method to closely analyze or describe the content, structure, and function of the messages contained in the selected text. The perspective of the playwright is used to interpret the data. This includes taking into account the purpose of the play text, the time period in which the text was written and the audience for the text.

Theoretical Framework

Like any other academic endeavour, this work is pegged on radical moralist theory. The bottom line of the radical moralist theory is on how certain literature, drama and culture can have positive moral effects on its audience. Specifically, the objective of racial moralist theory as propounded by Tolstoy (1994:9) is to explain the moral significance of arts in any given society. It posits that good artworks always bring about moral improvement which often results to moral education.

Nussbaum (1997:168) in her support of the radical moralist theory declares that “literature and drama have a place among moral philosophy and that artworks have important role in moral education due to their capacity to help develop certain moral abilities”. Nussbaum further asserts that “there are some morally relevant aspects of our inner lives that can only be represented accurately through artistic representation” (170-176).

The appropriateness of this theory is located within the framework that certain artworks such as drama can help the audience to develop moral abilities. In applying the radical moralist theory to Oyedepo’s *Doom in the Dimes*, Owoeje’s (Protagonist) situation and experience indeed, provide some moral lessons for the audience. It is worthy to note that Owoeje’s desperate search for wealth pushes him into signing a pact with the devil as he continues to soak his hands deep and deeper into the blood of the innocent including his beloved ones. He ended up shamefully. The moral lesson from this tragic drama is that material acquisition is futility and vanity with negative consequences; as such one should be contented with what he or she has got.

Synopsis of *Doom in the Dimes*

Doom in the Dimes is a tragedy of wealth. The story centers on Owoeje as protagonist. Owoeje not contented with what he has, seeks to create more wealth. Rather than struggle to acquire well-gotten or genuine wealth through hard work, he chooses the path of ill-gotten or illicit wealth through bloodshed and rituals. Owoeje’s determination and anxiety to transform from the poor to the wealthy class in order to gain recognition in the society, not minding the consequences pushes him into blood money.

To gain the world, Owoeje signs a pact with the devil which is irretraceable and the consequences irreversible. The montage of his soul cannot be paid back in dimes and the devil would take nothing but blood and the blood of his beloved ones. In a desperate bid to placate the implacable devil, Owoeje soaks his hands deep and deeper into the blood of the innocent.

In the first place, Latinwo and Yakubu (mendicants) are hacked to death by the axe-man on the orders of Owoeje (P.43). Owoeje’s only daughter, Iyun, mysteriously slumped and died (P.46). Owoeje’s wife, Oyin, staggered, fell down and died (P.49). Also, Abeni who is Owoeje’s maid collapsed on the floor and died (P. 52). For fear of death, Owoeje’s remaining household fled to an undisclosed destination. One of them Adanri (Owoeje’s loyal servant) laments: “This is the house of wealth; it is also the house of death”.

In addition to bloodshed, Owoeje gets involved in rituals, first by having carnal knowledge of a cat, an unnatural deed and an act most macabre (P.19). The result of the ungodly act is for Owoeje to lose his manhood. Further, Owoeje ritual causes two boys to appear lifeless, but not actually dead. They are kept permanently in one of the rooms in Owoeje's mansion carrying calabashes with their eyes bulged out like frog, vomiting money continuously for Owoeje (P.15). This goes to the extent to prove that Owoeje's wealth is associated with blood and ritual, and the wealth is so short-lived. Owoeje is finally exposed as he is full of regrets. He cries out, "if I ever have a chance of coming to this world again, I want to live and die a poor man, since I have got the money; I have not had any rest of mind" (P. 54).

He goes further:

I wish I have not done it. True enough poverty, like a spitting cobra buried in fangs into my flesh. The agony of poverty was unbelievable. The money came like heavy rainfall to wash away my sufferings. All the rains vanished. Money brought its joy---its gains. Money is a powerful force. It tunes a slave into a master, it turns a woman into a man, and it tunes the cowardly into valiant. But---yeah---all is short-lived. The knowledge of impending doom is too agonizing. The joy of riches is gone. The sweetness of it has changed into gall. Yeah---why did I do it"? (P.33). I now know better, poverty with peace and hope is much better than selling my soul to devil (P. 54).

In the concluding incident of the play, as demanded by Ifayomi (Ifa Priest), Owoeje is compelled by Eboda (medicine man) and Ewa (Eboda's aid) to part with his wealth paving the way for Eni's (Mendicant) inheritance. Owoeje finally leaves his mansion to the forest to have a date with death (PP.59-60). The tragic play comes to an end.

Dramatic Themes in *Doom in the Dimes*

Play texts in all ramifications are woven around themes. The tragedy of *Doom in the Dimes* is not an exception. In this play Oyedepo hammers on certain themes which include:

Illicit Wealth Creation

Two dimensions of wealth are evident in the play. The first and most salient is the one illicitly acquired by Owoeje through dubious means, and the second being the one inherited by Eni, one of the mendicants, following Owoeje's doom. In an ideal society, wealth is supposed to be created genuinely. This unfortunately, is not the situation we find in *Doom in the Dimes* concerning Owoeje's wealth. On the contrast, Eni's wealth is considered genuine even though the source of wealth he inherited from Owoeje is questionable (P.59). Specifically, therefore, the distinction between well-gotten wealth acquired through hard work, and ill-gotten wealth acquired through fraud, bloodshed and ritual is said to be one of the major themes in this play.

Doom in the Dimes is an aggressive confrontation on the Nigerian wealthy class who creates wealth by hook or by crook, not minding the consequences that follow such wealth. Instead of developing the society

with their wealth, they launder the money in different bank accounts, in their houses, soakaways, surface tanks, or buried it in a well-constructed underground holes in their farm lands and continue to create more social problems like murder and ritual to cover their tracks or secrets. Owoeje for instance shed a lot of blood to sustain his ill-gotten wealth but ends up shamefully. It is indeed very irresponsible of any member of any given society to toy with this similar part of destruction merely for wealth creation.

The key opposition between well-founded and ill-founded wealth seemed to me to be supported on contrasting view of British writer Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) who contends that “the rich are the scum of the earth in every country”. The point really is that people should avoid taking shortcuts to get rich quick, but instead work very hard and wait for God to reward them in his own good time.

Lack of Contentment

When someone is not contented with what he/she has got, such a person is likely to fall into the devil’s temptation. This is the situation Owoeje finds himself in. Owoeje in his words:

-----poverty drove me into this. I was poorer than a church rat. The harshness of ill-fortune was indescribable. Every day my only regular food was nature’s air. The day I stole a measure of *gari* in the market place decided it. I was given the beating of my life. I saw white. I mistook it for red. A friend introduced me to the medicine man who gave me the “*Lukudi*” at no cost...I have seen the result of an unwise decision. It came too soon (PP.37-38).

Apparently, Awoeje is not the poorest person in the community; however, lack of contentment makes it possible for Owoeje to become a tool in the hands of the devil. It could have been avoided if Owoeje is satisfied with his own level and position. Owoeje resolves that he has no choice than to soak his hands in more blood (P.39).

Violence, Bloodshed and Ritual

The theme of a man who has become rich through violence, bloodshed and ritual is focused upon in this play. The man in question is Owoeje. Unlike Owoeje, ritualists nowadays use human beings to create wealth illicitly, as their wealth is not gained by the sweat of their brow. This theme is relevant in contemporary society such as ours and it shows modern behavior exactly as it is. There are people in Nigeria today with questionable wealth who have built houses, driving exotic and flashy cars, wearing all kinds of sumptuous cloth and have good investments, and you who have worked for several years and have not made any savings might think, “it this person not born the same way I was born, how come oceans of money just flow to him like that”. You would not know that it is through violence, bloodshed or ritual that he has raised in the world. To create wealth, Owoeje misbehaved. He confesses that, “yes I did. I had carnal knowledge of a cat---to---to---yeah *orisa*! Yes, carnal knowledge of a cat. An unnatural deed. An act most macabre. But----Did I have a choice? I had to do it” (P.19).

This is an act of ritual. To sustain his wealth Owoeje engages in violence and bloodshed. He murders Latinwo, Yakubu, Iyun, Oyin and Abeni and uses their blood for sacrifice. Owoeje in the play exercises violence to the extent that he also has to die violently. This shows man's wickedness to man, and on how evil does not pay. Oyedepo has demonstrated through Owoeje's experiences as a main character in the play that the prevalent societal problems in Nigerian society today, especially bloodshed, violence and ritual, is in most cases caused by the wealthy class, mostly politicians.

Impatience

It is often said that "the patient dog eats the fattest borne" Owoeje's inability to endure the hardship confronting him at the time is an instance of impatience in the play. If he had endured, the situation may have come to pass. But impatience pushed him into instant riches which are not good for him after all. Owoeje is too desperate and to him, "a poor man is a dead man and that living in opulence for one year is much more profitable than longevity in poverty" (P.53). But his regrets are that, "now that my entire beloved are dead, what joy do I have left. Wealth is only sweet when there are loved ones to share it with" (P.53).

Reversal of Fortunes

Eni's inheritance of Owoeje's wealth is an instance of reversal of fortunes in the play (PP.59-60). Thus Owoeje's doom becomes Eni's boom. Owoeje's desire to remain rich comes crashing before his very eyes as divined by Ifa priest. Owoeje who used to swim in money has to part with his wealth paving the way for mendicant Eni's inheritance. Eboda assures Eani:

As from today, you become the wealthiest man in this town----Owoeje's riches become yours today.....Ifa has nominated you to inherit Owoeje's property.....Believe what I have told you! Owoeje is going to the forest to eat the poisonous root. The man is making his last appearance on earth. He has a date with death. Come Eni, come and look at your house, the grandeur and splendor of the magnificent building (PP-59-60).

Moral Lessons in *Doom in the Dimes*

Doom in the Dimes is a tragedy that captures a vision of contemporary moral crises. The purpose of this play is to impart moral lessons that are important to the society at large and Nigeria in particular. Having discussed the themes of the play, it is pertinent at this juncture to take critical look at the moral lessons. These include:

first and foremost, *Doom in the Dimes* teaches us that illicit accumulation of wealth must be punished by death. The case of Owoeje towards the end of the play is a clear example. We have witnessed situations in Nigeria where those who made money illegally are being kidnapped and sometimes killed after collecting ransomed from their family members by men of the underworld.

Oyedepo's tragic play teaches us that ill-gotten wealth brings retribution. Today, many Nigerian past Governors, Ministers and other public servants including judges are being prosecuted in different courts of law because of embezzlement. While few are punished with jail sentences, others are made or compelled to refund back to the government what they had stolen. The reality is that about 95 percent of the wealthy class in Nigeria, made their money dubiously and punishment certainly awaits all those who have created wealth illegally in this country.

Doom in the Dimes teaches us that we should not be impressed or enticed with big spenders because we do not know where their money came from. Today, the rich are respected, honoured and placed in high esteem. However, the fact remains that most of them are big thieves, big killers or big criminals. Their secrets are becoming more exposed now that the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) is tracing, identifying and arresting them one after another. Such people have over the years looted Nigeria dry and they should be made to refund what does not belong to them.

Another moral lesson in the play is that people should not be envious of each other. You should be content with what you have got, and be satisfied with it as what belongs to you. Owoeje's doom is due to his envy of rich men around him. In Nigeria today, the resentful or unhappy feeling of wanting somebody else's success, good fortune, qualities, or possessions is evidently pushing people into committing crimes.

The play teaches us that patience and hard work will be solidly rewarded, while ill-gotten wealth is not to be trusted. Owoeje's situation is that of from grace to grass because of the ingenuity of his wealth. In another development, Eni's patience sees him through to genuine richness. Apparently, most people that are opportune to loot while serving in government in most cases find it difficult to manage the money well. As soon as they live the services of the government, they become poorer like a "church rat". Money that came easily must surely go easily.

The play also teaches us that money is the root of evil and that the love of money often leads to regrets as seen in the character of Owoeje. Money is good, but it is wrong for one to destroy himself with it only to regret at last. Today, most people in the society have destroyed their lives in search of money at all cost. Many got killed in course of robbery operations.

Another moral lesson in Oyedepo's *Doom in the Dimes* is that, we should not be greedy. It is my belief that greed must have pushed Owoeje into this satanic idea. Today, greed is one of the main sources of corruption in Nigeria.

Finally, the play teaches that it is not all riches that are genuine. At the root of some riches is a shameful secret. If an investigation of how some people especially Nigerians suddenly get enormous wealth is to be conducted, sure the story would not be good to hear. Owoeje's source of wealth is not known until the evil and shameful secret reveals itself.

Doom in the Dimes and the Nigerian Society

Doom in the Dimes is a replica of the Nigerian society. Apparently, the Nigerian nation today is being confronted with corruption and other social problems due to the desire to get rich quick by certain unscrupulous elements both in public and private sectors. Such people in most cases undertake the absurd act at the expense of human lives. The question arising as French playwright, Moliere rightly observes in his play, *La Malade Imaginaire* while satirizing the French society is that, “why must one kill a lot of men to make so much money?”

Taking a cue from the foundation laid by medieval playwrights, Oyedepo’s *Doom in the Dimes* captures this reality in that she has used her knowledge of theatre to comment on serious moral issues in her immediate society and indeed the society at large. Her brand of theatre focuses on moral lessons as education and public enlightenment on the dangers of societal vices. *Doom in the Dimes* is a true mirror of the Nigerian society in terms of moral values. The issues raised in the play are reflection of the Nigerian society. For instance, illicit wealth creation, in which most Nigerians are out to make it by all means. This has given rise to corruption, embezzlement, armed robbery, kidnapping, thuggery, militancy and pipeline vandals, and scam. It may interest you to note that lack of contentment on the part of most individuals is pushing them into such a mess.

Furthermore, violence, bloodshed and rituals which are presented in *Doom in the Dimes* are reflection of Nigerian Society in the history of Nigeria as a nation. The Bako Haram insecurity in North-Eastern Nigeria has protracted for too long. In South- Eastern Nigeria, the Okija Shrine in which politicians also visit regularly to seek of power is a clear example. What about the trading in human parts by Clifford Oji in Lagos more than a decade ago? Obviously, the issues of moral values pointed out by Stella Oyedepo in *Doom in the Dimes* are indeed hampering the development of Nigeria as a nation. Until something is done morally, Nigeria’s image as a nation will continue to dwindle.

Conclusion

Stella Oyedepo is one of the famous African female playwrights that have contributed immensely to the development of Nigerian theatre. Her *Doom in the Dimes* among other plays is a jaunt into complexities or twist and turns of wealth especially when acquired illicitly. Written when the Nigerian society was rampantly experiencing high rate of killing due to ritualism, armed robberies and assassinations in the hands of evil wealth seekers. These atrocities persist in our society today, since the lust for wealth and wanton disregard for human life is unabated. These constitute serious societal problems which if not checked will sometimes someday throw Nigerian nation into ruin. The themes in the play offer fantastic moral lessons to the audience. The main concern is that if wealth must be created it should be done genuinely and not illicitly. Stella Oyedepo’s *Doom in the Dimes* suggests that change is needed in our society and that members of the public should discourage themselves from acquiring wealth that is

associated with bloodshed and embrace authentic wealth. The negative image of Nigeria can be corrected only if the moral lessons in the play are taken into consideration. Stella Oyedepo's *Doom in the Dimes* is therefore, ever so relevant to Nigerian society.

Contribution to Knowledge

The playwright, Stella Oyedepo, in her play *Doom in the Dimes* has successfully played her role to the Nigerian Society and indeed humanity as a teacher, educator, dramatist, and counsellor on moral issues that can promote our society.

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