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Socio-Political Fundamentals in Emeka Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral*

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Abstract
Nigerian society has witnessed different aspects of political leadership which have been effectively portrayed by the literary writers using their critical perspectives. Most of the works of the writers have captured the ordinance and characters of socio-political and historical existential experiences even to the contemporary space. These writers mostly reflect the identity of a nation, her social experiences and the peculiar nature of her governance in their re-creation of contemporary social issues. In particular, Emeka Nwabueze seems to take more interest in reflecting socio-political imperatives in his works. His works are seen to portray the place of the masses within the framework of political, economic, religious decadence, cultural and class injustices. This paper, therefore, adopts a sociological approach to literature as a theoretical framework in the attempt to interrogate the fundamental cases as navigated by Emeka Nwabueze using the descriptive methodological approach.
Keywords: Social, political, context, Leadership, Class Injustice

Introduction

Writers have not neglected the socio-political existence as thy have continued to point out those indices governing the society. These works produced by these writers serve as the eyes of the society, thus, through their works; the people see and understand the socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions in society which they may or may not have experienced.

It is such responsibility of the works of these writers that makes Osita Ezenwanebe, to espouses that particularly that, the "playwrights are therefore vanguards of society, keeping watchful eyes and attentive ears to the happenings in the society" (1). This is why in most of the works of the writers we see characters whose behaviours share similarities with what certain figures in the human society are portrayed. Focusing on drama, most often than not, the significant roles of the characters in most Nigerian plays become an attempt to point at any dislocation or decadence in the society. Tochukwu Okeke, holds that the playwright "uses drama as a tool to affect changes in his environment.., the dramatist aims at showing how things stand in his society…" (112). It is obvious that literature and society share a lot in common, where one gives the other its working resources, and vice versa.

Apparently, some Nigerian plays refer to the heroic sublimity of the Nigerian past. Sometimes, they reflect the pre-colonial and colonial life of the people. They carry in them the socio-political truths that characterize the Nigerian environment since independence. Directly or indirectly, many Nigerian works capture the social realities of a nation and reflect them through a striking linguistic meaning. In the re-creation of contemporary social issues, the second generation playwrights, to which Emeka Nwabueze belongs, took more interest in reflecting socio-political matters in their works. Ezenwanebe, also comments on the context and the intended function of the plays of these playwrights by saying that:

> Their works are… deeply committed to issues of immediate social relevance - from the issues of cultural contamination and degradation to those of moral and social decadence including inhuman oppression of the one class by another. It is believed that a realistic dramatisation of these socio-political and cultural issues, that is, a direct, matter-of-fact evaluation on the stage, would bring them to the consciousness of the audience who would then do something to sanitise the society (1).

Social imbalance and political dislocation, which characterize the Nigerian political history at one point or the other stand litmus in the evaluation of the plays. More importantly, even the older generation of the playwrights in Nigeria has also shown interest in the socio-political state of the nation, in order to reflect the relevance of their literary career. Akoh, one of the critics of modern Nigerian drama says that:

> in the present state of affairs, playwrights of the older generations, in order to still remain artistically and socially relevant to their environment have either modified their artistic vision or totally abandoned it for a new one that is more germane to the times (266).

In fact, considering the present Nigerian situation, these writers are aware of their roles and are unassuming in the portrayal of socio-politics. As such, they direct, affect and sharpen the perception of the people and at the same time employ artistic strategies that would preserve their integrity in their modest declaration as careful observers and commentators. These writers would not separate themselves from exposing the indices. They go on to stand in the perception detrimental to the society. According to Amouzou, the kind of characters these writers create "have vital relationships with their social and economic landscape" (330).

The Dragon's Funeral is a social drama that paints a picture of a society that is under the siege of colonial imperialism and wantonness of the indirect rule system of governance. It represents

in the dramatic form the famous historic Aba Woman Riot of 1929. It presents the female character, Adaugo, as an amazing power-force. As Ekwedike, the village bard espouses the daring character of Adaugo and all she stands for, one sees her heroic commitment in handling issues like political scamming, gender inequality and undue exploitation of the ruled by the rulers.

As the play opens, the market women of Ngwa land (Abia state in South Eastern part of Nigeria) sing some folksongs as they gather their wares to go home. Ekwedike meets the women and in excitement, they eulogise his sterling talent as a great story teller. As the women sing praises of Ekwedike, he in turn, informs them that it is in the same Orie market that the great woman leader, Adaugo who championed the women's revolution against the taxation of Ngwa women by the colonial masters, had her stall.

Ekwedike describes the indefatigable character of Adaugo as "the valiant's jaw that grows gray beards... the mighty man-woman who led the Aba women in an uprising that shook the Colonial Administration" (6). As a result of the great deeds of Adaugo and the social importance, Ekwedike infers that whatever she fought for "will soon be told in moonlight nights" (9). Also through the story of Ekwedike, Adaugo's rejection of the injustice of colonialism and its indirect system of governance prepares her as the hammer that finally smashes the head of the dragon - Chief Okeugo (a warrant chief) who also encourages taxing the women.

Furthermore, the play depicts the selfish attitudes of the colonial administrators (Weir and Cook) and the corrupt behaviour of the Warrant Chiefs represented by Chief Okeugo, Adaka, Idike, etc. Cook, the District Commissioner, decides to impose tax on every produce of the natives against the tradition of the people which sees the move as uncultured. Obviously, the men give in to this development and fail to confront it. Adaugo, uncomfortable with it, decides to put a stop to it. She takes time to motivate other

women to revolt against all forms of colonial and patriarchal supremacist consciousness. This situation is what Adaugo sees as cruelty, suffering, etc.

> **Adaugo:** Cruelty occurs when a person deliberately inflicts suffering on another
>
> and relishes it, especially when he considers the person less advantaged
>
> than himself. Only cruel people take delight in inflicting suffering on
>
> another for its own sake. Look at what the government is doing to us.
>
> They confiscate our land, they impose the administration on us, and now
>
> they want to tax us when we don't even have enough to eat or feed our
>
> children.They have pushed us to the wall and there's no going back. (64)

From the above situation, Adaugo finally succeeds in carrying along the women in her fight against undue subjugation. With all hands on deck, they finally fight to a standstill the issue of taxation and symbolically celebrate the funeral of the Dragon: Chief Okeugo.

Socio-Political Fundamentals in *The Dragons Funeral*

Fraud and Political Deceit: The issues of fraud and political scamming in Nigerian politics have affected the development of the Nigerian society and also preoccupied the minds of most Nigerian writers. This is obvious in the play *The Dragons Funeral*, therefore, comments on the mal-administration and political scam that characterize the nation's polity. Olowonmi, comments on the writer's involvement in recreating such social activities. Thus that, the writer "is therefore a true artist, always wanting to create works answering the most urgent questions engaging the contemporary mind" (59). *The Dragon's Funeral* reflects characters whose

actions and attitudes depict corrupt and criminal attitude intended towards personal and financial gain. The political situation of the society in this play captures how some political officials, in their carefully planned schemes, and intrigue manipulate every condition to satisfy their selfish interest and by so doing defraud the people. The fraudulent passion of the political officials made Julius-Adeoye, to say that in the activities of most of the Nigerian officials occupying different political offices "fraud and corruption are negative Siamese twins that are ever present" (2).

The Dragon's Funeral also reflects an ambience of fraud, where the District Officers - Weir and Cook - discuss how to impose tax on the people to satisfy the selfish interest of the Colonial Administration. In view of the possible effect of taxation, Cook and Weir in their conversation remark:

> **Cook:** But that will be tantamount to taxing women.
> **Weir:** Does it matter? The natives don't deserve such considerations. We've
> brought them civilisation and they should pay for it even if they have to sell
> their children. (Rises) it may interest you to know that natives have to be
> howled with iron hands...Remember that discussion with the natives is
> more monologue than dialogue. (32)

To show that the natives do not deserve any kind of fair treatment, when the chiefs came to see Cook, he tells Nduka (the Secretary) not to bring them in immediately. It is such selfish and cautiously planned act of neglect that brought to limelight the situation of subjugation expressed below:

> **Cook:** Don't bring them immediately. Let them wait for some time. Tell them I'm
> very busy with very important matters of State. Tell them I'm writing a letter

to the Queen of England. If you bring them in just like that, they will feel
important.

Nduka: Yes, sir. But do I give them some entertainment since they fall under the
category of V.I.P?

Cook: Entertain-what? Who d'you think they are? Princes, Thanes, or Dukes? Do
you understand what you are saying? (33-34)

Dictatorial Leadership and Exploitation: Nigerian politics has been faced with leadership ineptitude, which tilted towards dictatorial governance, abuse of power, exploitation, political instability, embezzlement of public funds, etc. It has also seen leaders that exercise absolute power, incorrigible behaviour, selfishness, class-consciousness, and exploitation in their programmes. Invariably, Emeka Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral* incorporate in it issues of inept governance.

In *The Dragon's Funeral*, the ineptitude of the leaders and their callousness also manifest in different ways. The play paints a picture of a political state of affairs during the colonial rule where the colonists are only passionate about their own welfare. This is why Cook - the district officer - says:

The warrant chiefs may run their communities with iron hands, or engage them
In forced labour but who cares? Once they adhere to the instruction of the
Administration what they do with their subjects is no business of ours. After all,
the black man is not famous for being his brother's keeper. (29)

A result of the over-riding influence of the colonial administration, the appointed Warrant Chiefs are programmed to work for the

colonists against the interest and comfort of their fellow people. This Indirect Rule system of governance brings about loss of local control and the mutual interaction that exists between the natives and the administrators by placing the colonial interest above the cultural integrity and welfare of the local community.

The warrant Chiefs are used as sign posts to guide the behaviour of the natives as long as they remain accountable and obedient to the constitution of the colonial administration. This new order of governance (the use of Warrant Chiefs) according to Njoku, "created a new socio-political climate in which uncontrollable deceit, extortions and various forms of corruption held sway...the Warrant Chiefs operated under a different system characterised by surreptitiousness"(103). The warrant Chiefs in *The Dragon's Funeral* represented by Chief Okeugo, Adaka, Idike and Okeosisi, become an arrow in the hands of the district officers for disrupting the unity of the natives. Idike one of the warrant chiefs, emphatically tells Igwe Adaka:

> I should remind you that he who pays the labour dictates the pace of the work.
>
> We were appointed by the District Officer, and we should behave according to
>
> his dictates. Truth is like a sharp spear, which files home and does not miss. (46)

The above view depicts that the Warrant Chiefs are manipulated to make the District Officers happy and, in the words of Njoku, "once the colonial officer was happy with them, they need not bother about their people" (103).

Chief Okeugo, the Dragon himself becomes a channel through which the natives are unduly exploited. Even when other Warrant Chiefs are not committed to the demand of the colonialists to count the native farm produce and the women, Chief Okeugo, in his pride, decides to take the bull by the horns by instructing

Emereuwa, the primary school teacher, to help him do the counting. In consideration of the implication of carrying out such unethical and selfish instruction, Emeruwa in doubt and discomfort tells Chief Okeugo:

> **Emeruwa:** Igwe, I hope that the people will understand what we're doing. That there will be no resistance when I start to execute your directive?
>
> **Okeugo:** In this land? Who will resist you when they realize that you were sent by the Dragon? And that you are acting under the directive of government. Our women are as fickle as the leaves, which we use in the preservation of kola nuts. After you have done your job, I will compensate you appropriately. The man that does an excellent job deserves appropriate compensation. When we receive the taxes, we shall preserve some for ourselves. So ensure that the counting is meticulously done. (61)

Chief Okeugo in his pride and selfishness believes so much in his strength as a demi-god that cannot be dismissed in a hurry or challenged by the natives or the Administrative Officers. It is this situation of over-arching and irrational behaviour that finally destroys Chief Okeugo, the Dragon.

Subjugation and Domination: The themes of subjugation and domination have remained recurrent issues in most Nigerian drama. As a result of the differences in social classes and opportunities, the Nigerian literary output has so much reflected different evidence of inequity, unfairness and possible protest movements. There has always been the issue of the few dominating the society because they enjoy some kind of political privileges.

Despite the obvious domination of the District Officers over the natives in *The Dragon's Funeral*, the attitude of the Ngwa men towards their women depicts an aura of macho dominance. The decision to also tax women which Adaugo, the women leader, sees as subjugation and unacceptable is because to her, the colonial administration "takes the best of our land, they have castrated our husbands, and now they want to turn their attention to us, women, simply because our men have been completely intimidated" (l8). The inability of the man to see the uncommon importance of the women is also captured when Ikodie tells her husband, Dike that:

> **Ikodie:** I don't mean to annoy you, my husband. I want you to understand me (thinks)
>
> but come to think of it, don't you think that women have a right to hold
>
> meetings, a right to decide on how to handle certain issues?
>
> **Dike:** No! The place of the woman is in the home. It is the duty of the men who
>
> know better to decide for the women... (52)

It is such a submerged image of the woman in Dike's comment as recreated in most literary works that makes Nwahunanya, to say:

> What the dominance of men in the literature meant was that whenever women
>
> appeared in literature, they tended to occupy a peripheral position as wives,
>
> mothers, house helps, prostitutes... stereotypical roles which are not intended to
>
> improve the female image but, which rather underline the superiority of the male
>
> in the social structure (193).

This represents the understanding that the male-dominated atmosphere portrays women as people who do not have the right to

initiate any positive change or even take care of themselves. Methuselah, says that most of the women are depicted as "fearful, effeminate and docile - easily reduced to tears and emasculated" (51).

Adaugo, in an attempt to break loose from the trend of gender abuse and subjugation, organises and motivates the women to say 'no' to all forms of injustices and neglect. In her bid to stop the demeaning image of the women caused by the male-dominated environment, she tells the women that "our aim is to fight injustice, to fight for our rights… as women we have to do what we feel is right, even if men try to stop us" (24). To her, the gap between the man and the woman could be closed by their fight against injustice and gender inequality.

Revolution

Revolution as a theme has been interrogated by Nigerian literary makers. It has often been made manifest in some of the works of Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, Kole Omotoso, Esiaba Irobi, Emeka Nwabueze, among others. This group of writers believes that no positive social change can take place without some radical efforts channelled to reform and rehabilitate a fractured society. Indeed, revolution has been a veritable instrument in the hands of the exploited to break loose from the chains of marginalisation, subjugation, stigmatisation, etc., imposed on them by the privileged few. Emeka Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral*, also reflects this idea of revolution through Adaugo who encourages her fellow women to stand against the taxation of women (imperialism), gender discrimination and domination. In order to redeem the image of the society from colonial oppression, Adaugo submits:

> My sisters, we shall not allow ourselves to be taxed. We shall resist any attempt to
> harass us. We shall put things in order. Our quiet land has turned into fracas fire. It

> has become a place where strangers milk people without any moral scruples or
> conscience. And our men look weakly and do nothing. We should not be afraid to fight... We must resist the government. And if they come after us, we must fight back! (19)

Adaugo encourages the women to challenge the unwanted polices of the colonial administration and total male-domination. Ikodie tells her husband, Dike, and her husband's friend, Kalu that their position as men in the society is now only ceremonial. To her, men have failed them and allowed strangers (colonial masters) to manipulate and destroy their ethical and cultural beliefs without any attempt to defend their heritage. Kalu, uncomfortable with Ikodie's position, inquires:

> **Kalu:** Wait a minute, Dike, let me find out something from her. How do you
> determine a man?
> **Ikodie:** Look at the whole town. There's no peace, there's fear everywhere and you
> men do nothing about it. And you call yourselves men. You cancel your
> meeting anytime because government wants you to work for him... How can
> you call yourself a man when there's no food in the house, when there's no
> peace in your community? (55)

It is these unanswered questions raised by Ikodie that propel the women to revolt, and in the words of Adaugo: "after we have dealt with the government, we shall come back home to settle the problem of the household. We shall tell our men how we expect to be treated" (62).

Adaugo believes that communal struggle is the only possible means through which total victory can be possible. Is it not written that "red is the freedom road?" She decides to educate other women before they revolt so that the end-result will be effective.

This collective movement against social anomalies reminds us of Adakonye & Jegede, who say: "social ills… and all forms of perversion are all products of unjust society and they could be reduced to the barest minimum in our country by the collective will" (19). Moreover, the political injustices in contemporary Nigerian society can only be handled when the people collectively decide to fight against the gleam of inordinate power and wealth, reckless materialism, discriminations and all forms of injustice. This is as Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi*, which reflects the importance of communal or collective revolution against oppression and abuse. The quest for such revolution becomes visible through the remark of one of the characters:

> This is our moment our movement when we must gather our strength and energies
> into the demand of a revolution. This is the movement when what makes us young
> men and women must master us to the last and supreme sacrifice. The supreme
> action. The greatest decision. This is the moment of revolt we must cross the
> threshold now. All of us (28).

As Chief Okeugo decides to actualise the colonial policy to count farm yields and tax women through Emeruwa who had fallen out with Adaugo, Emeruwa addresses Adaugo's attitude as disrespectful, thus:

> **Emeruwa:** Woman, be civil I'm the government himself, and if you disrespect me I
> will be forced to teach you a lesson.
> **Adaugo:** (Ties her wrapper securely on her waist) Teach me a lesson? Now, go
> ahead and teach me a lesson. It is on the body of a woman that our strength
> is strongest! (67-68)

As other women, in anger, join Adaugo, Emeruwa laments that "this is misplaced aggression... if you think you are strong go and confront the man who sent me" (68). From this awareness, the women match to the District Officer's lodge where Chief Okeugo had taken refuge. Adaugo demands that Chief Okeugo, the 'eye' of the District Officer, be released to them. She vehemently states their mission: "Our role as women is to cleanse the society of pollution whether the pollution was caused by our husbands, or children or even strangers, does not matter" (73). The Adaugo-led women revolution also requests that Chief Okeugo be brought to them else they will wreak havoc on the District Officer's lodge. Thus, we hear:

> **Adaugo:** We are not beggars. We want the so-called Dragon. Let him come out and
>
> face the funeral. He hides under the protection of the white man to wear the
>
> garb of the dragon.
>
> **Nduka:** The District Officer has already sacked him. He just allowed him to stay in
>
> the lodge in order to avoid bloodshed. He understands your situation, but
>
> he wants you to calm down.
>
> **Adaugo:** How can he understand our situation? Let him prove to us that the Dragon
>
> has been sacked. (74)

The women therefore decide to ask for Okeugo's cap and his staff of office (symbols of authority). Nduka brings them and gives them to the women. Adaugo takes the staff and breaks it, and the other women tear the cap into shreds. Immediately, the women begin a funeral procession, an action which symbolically celebrates the funeral and overthrow of the Dragon and colonial imperialism. In order to secure a just life and future for the women and the entire Ngwa society, Adaugo says:

> We are simple people but not simpletons. Our cause is not yet fulfilled. We know

> the difference between victory and success. Go back and tell the District officer
> to declare in writing that women will never be taxed, that the counting of people and
> farm products should stop immediately. Tell him to write down that forced labour
> should stop and the women should be consulted before any decision affecting them
> is concluded. Let him write them down so we can preserve it as an agreement
> between the government and us. (76-77)

As a result of this demand, Nduka, the secretary to the District Officer, comes out with a written agreement-paper that shows that the demands of the women have been duly considered.

Unfortunately for Chief Okeugo, the Colonial Administration he worked for judges him and finds him guilty. Okeugo in such dilemma acknowledges before the court that "you work to give pleasure and to give pain. Pleasure to the administration, which you serve and pain to the people whose land you so blatantly occupy. I am a clear example of the enigma represented by your administration"(12). In conclusion, the Judge says:

> I will, therefore, be failing in my duty to the Crown if I do not impose on you
> the type of sentence that will deter others from even contemplating a repetition
> of the grievous offence. This court takes into consideration the fact that you; notorious
> accomplice, Mr. Mark Emeruwa, has already been sentenced by another court. You
> are sentenced to five years imprisonment with hard labour. (15)

In fact, the above result is possible because a group of women decided to fight against socio-political anomalies that have grievously altered the regulations of a society.

Finally, *The Dragon's Funeral* appeals to the conscience of the audience because it treats issues that are socio-political and at the same time handle other challenging social problems in the Nigerian society. Through the play, the Nigerian social matrix is evolved and made represented to the contemporary society. In *The Dragon's Funeral*, Nwabueze uses history to achieve an artistic imprint by the re-creation of the Aba women uprising of 1929

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