The Playwright, Creativity, and Society: Unpacking Sunnie Ododo's *To Return From the Void*

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Abstract

The role of the playwright as a force for social reconstruction has been given much attention in theatre scholarship and continues to be a fertile ground for research. Because playwrights draw their stories from society, it is necessary to study their works in order to construe the ways by which they craft our world and make us view society through their own eyes, narratives, symbols, images, and imagination. This paper analyses the play *To Return From the Void* by Sunnie Ododo to unearth the salient issues and themes addressed in the play. This paper posits that through their treatment of society, playwrights influence the consciousness of the people by bringing salience to certain issues in society. The analysis of the play also reveals the playwright's ideological position on issues. It is plausible to say that character and dialogue are the media through which the playwright channels his ideologies in a play.

Keywords

Agenda-setting, ideology, national development, society, playwright

Drama has been proven to be an effective medium for social commentary. Ibagere and Omoera (2010) agree that from the inception of Nigerian theatre, dramatists have often been involved in the Nigerian political process, using their works as commentaries on society in a bid to drive the Nigerian political development. *To Return From the Void* is a musical drama which captures a period in Nigeria's political history—a pure satire. Sunnie Ododo's play resides among the constellation of works which utilize dramatic expression for dissidence and advocacy. Satirical plays are popular in Nigerian theatre. Some examples include *Once Upon Four Robbers* by Femi Osofisan, *Madmen and Specialists* by Wole Soyinka, and *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* by Ola Rotimi.

The play's historical trajectory begins from the colonial era in Nigeria characterised by exploitation to

post-colonial Nigeria saddled with poor leadership and corruption. The play explores the fight for independence by the dentarean leaders who represent the nationalist spirit. The play's climax is a note of promise but the end is marred by the way the very people (dentarean leaders) who fought for independence, polluted the system afterwards. After gaining independence from the colonial masters, the nationalist spirit dissolved, allowing ethnic differences and selfish interests to take centre stage.

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Despite the play's retrospective outlook, it is topical, reflective, and still relevant today. The relevance of this play is best analysed against the backdrop of the democratic era in Nigeria beginning from 1999. In the play, colonialism and military rule are frowned at by the playwright but history has shown that things have worsened in a democratic era. We can liken the colonial period treated in the play to the pre-democracy era in Nigerian politics and the post-colonial times treated in the play to democratic rule in Nigeria.

One theory which can aid our understanding of the playwright and social commentary is the agenda-setting theory in communication studies. The agenda-setting theory was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw and first appeared in *The Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1972. Their seminal work asserts that the mass media set the agenda of political campaigns and influence public opinion by determining the salient issues for discourse (McCombs and Shaw 1972). The theory which was first tested on political campaigns has gone on to be used on other areas of society. Several researches have confirmed the validity of the theory. K. Lang and G. Lang (1966: 468) opine that:

The mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass media think about, know about, have feelings about.

As captured by McCombs (2004), a zero-sum game explains the competition among issues in the media for attention and that several factors like time and space affect what news is accommodated in the media. However, in theatre, it is different, playwrights take issues from society and dramatize them. Some of these issues remain in the circle of society, thus sustaining their treatment over and over again. This explains the similarity in the thematic preoccupations of several plays regardless of their timeline.

It is this active selection of issues to project in plays by dramatists that concerns us in the paper. This power of the playwright to draw public attention to certain societal issues highlights his influence in the public sphere. We can say that the playwright sets his agenda, which could be to entertain, inform, or educate.

As in the case of media content which could be given salience through repetition, size of headline, cover in the news, or frequency of story, the major way the playwright sets the agenda of the play is through the themes exposed in the text. To enhance this, in the play in view, the playwright sets the agenda through the chapter titles which he uses to lay the itinerary of the play to guide the audiences understanding of the play.

ANALYSIS OF *TO RETURN FROM THE VOID*

Ododo's satire comes alive through symbolism, characterisation, language, and songs. Ododo's characters are not abstract figures but clear representations of the reality they are intended to portray. They are alive in attitudes, behaviours, languages, speech patterns, and actions related to the ethnic or racial divisions they represent in the play which helps the reader appreciate their reality.

The playwrights use of names associated with the three major ethnic groups (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) in Nigeria helps the audience to identify their geographical locations and representations. Throughout the course of the play, the playwright delineates the Nigerian society as it is.

Nneka: Talk of robbers.

Response: *Dem dey boku*.

Nneka: Weda with gun or pen. (Ododo 2012: 41)

Dankwushi: "Talk am for beggars, Alimajiri plenty plenty. Whether blind or crippled". "Monopolizers of power. We get am plenty plenty. Whether military or civilian". (Ododo 2012: 42)

Awotoye: "Talk of juju makers. Aah! Won po repete". (Ododo 2012: 43)

Dankwushi represents the Hausa people or people from the Northern part of Nigeria and in reality, most leaders (civilian and military) have come from that region, hence, “monopolizers of power”. Also, the Hausa people find it difficult to pronounce the letter “p” which they mostly pronounce as “fi”. The reason why the playwright uses “phlenty phlenty” in Dankwushi’s dialogue above. The Yoruba people who are from the Western part of Nigeria represented by Awotoye are renowned for their use of “juju” or black magic for protection or to harm others. This has been well documented in Yoruba movies. It is difficult to find a Yoruba movie void of this element. Igbos, on the other hand, are perceived as a people who would do anything for material gain as seen in the actions of the character Nneka in the play.

As expected in a musical drama, the spine of the play *To Return From The Void* is the use of songs. The songs in the play serve a multi-functional role, they help to drive the satirical content of the play, they also add musical velocity to the dialogue in the play; for repetition, emphasis and to support the action within the play. The playwright also uses the songs in the play to create some forms of dialogue between the characters and the reader/audience.

Chorus: Staring them in the face
The stories of death by hanging
On the neck
Please count them out of it! (Song ends). (Ododo 2012: 28)

The songs in the play are efficient not only in conveying the ideas of the playwright (for example, in the protest songs in Movement II, Scene One, the playwright expresses his dissent to colonial rule), but also making them reoccur in the sub-conscious of the reader and most effectively on the viewer of the play. Sound has a retentive element which aids in memorisation. For example, it is more comfortable singing a national anthem than reciting it. One may tend to forget some lines or words when reciting but

when sung, it is easier to remember the lines because of the rhythm of song. The songs are embedded in every movement and scene in the play. This highlights the importance of music in African theatre.

Ododo’s creative ingenuity as a playwright can be seen in the creation of the word “Dentarean”. Splitting it into three parts “Dent”, “Area”, and “N”, it suggests a country (area) that has been battered (dent) and is in need of repair. The “n” in “Dentarean” is used for the purpose of identity like the term Nigerian. Dentarean is a metaphor for Nigeria and denotes a country or society facing decadence. Although, this might have been coincidental, it is a creative component of the play worthy of note.

The character Mother Earth validates our claim. We can say that Mother Earth metaphorically represents the state of the nation, animating the tragic goal of the play to symbolise the decadence of the Dentarean state (Nigeria). According to the Angelic Spirit while addressing the dentarean leaders, “... in your hands lies her future” (Ododo 2012: 53). This suggests that the future of the nation lies in the leaders of the nation.

Mother Earth also creates a conflict of personality, she assumes both a physical and spiritual presence. On the one hand, she is worshipped and adored; on the other hand, she exhibits physical attributes like feeling pain, agony, and other emotions. For example, the children sing praises to her, “Holy is your name, pure is your name, majestic your grace, treasure to our race, our acts of shame, we want to retrace” (Ododo 2012: 49). But earlier, Mother Earth’s song confuses us, “... Your wickedness hooked me to the amber of sorrow. Melting the shine of my ‘morrow’. Another life I cannot borrow” (Ododo 2012: 49). This takes away the spiritual essence from her because we are aware that like humans, her life also has an end.

The playwright introduces the military in the play to highlight the incompetency of the dentarean leaders who symbolise civilian rule to lead. This incompetence can be seen in the manner the Nigerian

Government reacted in rescuing the Chibok girls abducted by the Boko Haram sect. The shooting of Mother Earth by the military symbolises the defects of military rule in Nigeria. Ododo's injunction is that the military has no regard for customs or traditions and that military rule in Nigeria contributed heavily to the under development of the nation. Mother Earth needing healing from her bullet wound sustained from the military raid dramatizes the idea of the playwright. Her wounds symbolise the damage done on the nation. Furthermore, despite the prayers of the dentarean leaders, Mother Earth's health is not restored. The playwright wants to suggest that Nigeria is still suffering from the effects of military rule many years after. The cries of the children of Mother Earth highlights this point, "... Your family degenerates every day to no avail" (Ododo 2012: 51). Ododo believes that things have not changed, only variegated.

Through the dialogue in the play, the playwright's voice is constantly heard. In the extract below, he suggests that from the inception of democracy and military rule, there has been anomalies in both systems. Linking it with present reality, a great number of the politicians in this democratic dispensation in Nigeria were ex-military officials. This explains why the playwright believes democracy and militocracy are twin brothers.

Chorus-Soldiers: (Sing.) Democracy and militocracy are twin brothers endowed with craze at infancy. (Ododo 2012: 50)

The extract below illustrates the division of Nigeria into several parts marking the birth of tribalism in Nigeria, an apportion which has caused more harm than good.

Dankwushi: And now business of constitution. Remember, the North belongs to me?
Awotoye & Nneka: Haba, the entire North?
Dankwushi: Yes, no compromise or negotiation.
Awotoye: And the South is mine!
Nneka & Dankwushi: South?

Awotoye (Laughing): I mean South West.

Nneka: That means the entire South East is mine.

Awotoye: We must swear to keep what belongs to us. (Ododo 2012: 37-38)

Ododo also questions the honesty of the nationalists who fought for Nigeria's independence. It is important to note that as much as the playwright dishes out answers to issues, he is also an inquisitive being who is also seeking answers to social realities.

The dialogue in the play is fraught with meaning and undertones. Repetition is used throughout the play for the purpose of emphasis. Rhyme is also a common element in the play and it is employed by the playwright to add spice to the dialogue and songs in the play. Examples include:

Children: (Sing.) To God we shout
For his way out. (Ododo 2012: 51)

Humour in the play is driven through the use of irony. For example, in the extract below, the idea of a Union Jack been a jack union is ironical and funny. Substitute the word "jack" with "wack" and it is as if the playwright is saying the jack union is a wack union.

Colonial Master: But the Union Jack is there.
Dentarean Leaders: No, no, no, not a jack union.
Colonial Master: The jack union?
Dentarean Leaders: Yes, Union Jack.
Awotoye: Is a jack union. (Ododo 2012: 33)

To Return From the Void is laden with themes: inequality, racial discrimination, exploitation, leadership, corruption, reverse fortunes, unity, etc. Suffice to say that they are interlinked textually like warp and weft in the fabric of the play. Ododo does not waste time to serve his authorial intentions. Mother Earth's speech in the Tableau is a deliberate choice by the playwright to create a backdrop for the main subject matter of the play: exploitation. According to Mother Earth, "... The colonial masters

came, they came and imposed themselves on us. They seized the rulers' crowns but we resisted them. They forced them to sign their own treaties. They exploited and vandalized our treasures. Our youths and able bodies enslaved. Across the oceans to diaphora" (Ododo 2012: 20).

Through this narrative, the playwright deploys the flashback technique to conjure a mental picture in the readers mind about pre-colonial times which is not captured in the plot of the play. According to Ododo, the epicentre of the challenges facing Nigeria can be traced to the colonial times. Mother Earth brags "We are proud of our ancient empires" (Ododo 2012: 20). This statement expresses the playwright's position that things were better before the coming of the imperialists in Nigeria and Africa at large and to give insight on the rich cultural heritage which existed. In the play, this theme is captured firstly in the narrative of Mother Earth about colonialism, and secondly, through the expressions of the dentarean leaders.

Colonial Master: That's the Union Jack.
Awotoye: With it we've been jacked.
Colonial Master: How is that true?
Awotoye: We cannot plan for our future.
Dankwushi: Cannot make our own laws.
Nneka: Play our own politics. (Ododo 2012: 33)

This extract above sheds more light on the playwright's intention. It is very interesting because it presents many areas for discussion. Ododo's agenda-setting can be viewed in his use of words. The idea of been "jacked" paints the picture of exploitation. The playwright uses this to articulate the exploitation of the Nigerian people by the colonial masters (Something one can argue is still prevalent today). Politics is often perceived as a game (a dangerous game to add) and this ideology is further emphasised by Nneka's words "Play our own politics".

The play is a direct swipe at colonialism and a support for nationalism. "We are free today... The giant of Africa is free today" (Ododo 2012: 35). This

implies that the Nigerian people had been in bondage under colonial rule. In Movement II, Scene One, the playwright using the protest songs enumerates some of the dangers of colonialism.

The Tableau and the Ballad of Nigerian Philosophy which are the opening and closing bits of the play, respectively summarise the stance of the playwright on colonialism in Africa and corruption in Nigeria and can be said to be a form of agenda-setting.

Ballad of Nigerian Philosophy:
A minister of state who was no chief
Came once to an oba's conference
Some chiefs would, like a common thief
Eject him from our presence
But I proposed we waive the law
And offered him my cushion
Prostrated full-length on the floor
I pledged my life devotion. (Ododo 2012: 60)

"Waive the law" depicts the Nigerian society where laws are bent to accommodate certain individuals in certain situations. Thereby supporting the saying: Nothing is impossible. This reminds us of Obasanjo and his desire to manipulate the constitution in a bid to run for a third term. However, it took strong opposition from the polity to halt the plan.

Nigerian leaders have a proclivity for corruption. There are people who believe corruption is a metonymy for Nigerian Government. In the play, Ododo exposes the corrupt nature of Nigerian leaders mirrored by the corrupt practices of the dentarean leaders; leaders interested in their own interests rather than service to the people. Nigeria's democracy is far from the concept of government of the people, by the people, for the people.

These exchanges between the dentarean leaders in Movement II, Scene Four, shortly after they have gained independence throws more light on this. Awotoye expresses his discontent, "Dankwushi, this independence cannot be sweet because my 10.8 billion dollars still hangs in your bank account" (Ododo 2012: 37). Nneka is excited about her fortune, "Listen. You

need to see my own account. It keeps smiling at me” (Ododo 2012: 37). The focus on corrupt leadership continues in Movement III, Scene One:

Awotoye & Nneka: “... the people are suffering in silence” (Ododo 2012: 45). Dankwushi responds: “Leave the people alone!”. (Ododo 2012: 45)

If we thought the two representatives of the dentarean family were bothered about the suffering of the people, we are made clear about their true intentions later on:

Awotoye: Leave the people alone *ehn*, and allow them to pour sand into our garri?

Dankwushi: Please let go, since they are not complaining!

Nneka: Dankwushi, let go, let go,
Let go and they will start protesting.

Awotoye: True! Let go! Let go! Let go!!
And they will start protesting.

Dankwushi: (Suddenly realizing his folly.)
That is true *faa*!

What do we do... quick?

Awotoye & Nneka: Let's organize a day of honour for Mother Earth to appease them.

Dankwushi: (Later joined by both Nneka and Awotoye in a show of mockery.)

Otherwise they will soon march the street shouting:

We protest 3x

People of Nigeria 2x

We protest!

(He brings them some bags of money, and they sing).
(Ododo 2012: 45-46)

Here, the playwright takes us on a journey into the minds of those we refer to as Nigerian leaders. These scenes also reveal the very beginnings of corruption in Nigeria and why it has continued to be a bane on leadership. Hosting a party for Mother Earth reflects the type of leaders we have, who proffer unnecessary solutions to issues. This is reflected in the proposal of the Jonathan administration in 2010 to celebrate Nigeria's independence on a budget of 10 billion naira when there is abject poverty in the country and lack of basic social amenities: water, electricity, good roads,

etc.

This may also explain why the play lacks a clear protagonist in the sense of the word. At the point where the dentarean leaders fought and gained independence, we assume that they are the protagonists but their selfish acts afterwards pits them in the same ship as the colonial master who exploited. We make bold to say that Mother Earth is the protagonist in the play and the colonial master, dentarean leaders and the military are the antagonists. The very absence of an obvious protagonist in the play gives the impression that Ododo believes that we are to blame for the decadence in our society.

Ododo believes in change through seeking divine direction and the characters “Angelic Spirit” and “Bulldozer” are the carriers of this torch. By connecting the messages of the characters “Bulldozer” and “Angelic Spirit”, the playwright speaks to the audience and uses the former to reiterate the solution proffered by the latter. In Movement IV, Scene One, the Angelic Spirit addresses the dentarean leaders, “... Your pot of wealth has been stolen. Seek out the thieves to restore your health” (Ododo 2012: 53). In the same movement and scene: Bulldozer: “Our root of miseries we saw revealed but want to conceal” (Ododo 2012: 57). The unwillingness of the dentarean leaders to implement the advice of the angelic spirit illustrates the unwillingness of the Nigerian leaders to do the right thing to move the nation forward.

According to Bulldozer, “Divine direction we sought and found but left for the bush path” (Ododo 2012: 56). The playwright here reveals the nature of humans to not necessarily desire the things they pursue. For example, we may pursue a spiritual life but our thoughts, words, and actions may be contrary and lean toward materialism and worldly things. He asserts this point in his attack “All because of kobo kobo... All because of Egunje” (Ododo 2012: 57). The playwright attributes the decadence in the Nigerian society to the pursuit of materialism.

The playwright suggests in the extract below that

with inner cleansing and common sense, Nigerians as a people can make better decisions and arrive at productive outcomes:

Angelic Spirit: (Speaks.) Now listen to this
Circumcise your hearts,
Let common sense prevail
In all your actions
And your goals you shall reach. (Ododo 2012: 53)

In treating corruption, the playwright focuses more on materialism. In Movement IV, Scene One of the play, the dentarean leaders are divided on how to heal Mother Earth. Awotoye suggests a confession session, Dankwushi suggests prayers. Initially, Nneka and the people reason with Awotoye but when bribed with money by Dankwushi, they all support Dankwushi's suggestion.

Nneka: Having reconsidered
Dankwushi's position,
I found plenty of
"Ego-logical" wisdom in it.
So my people,
Why worry about
Family's field
When logic of the ever rich
Is at your reach? (Ododo 2012: 55)

Nneka outrightly reveals that she will bend to any situation, as long as the outcome is financially favourable to her. The playwright tries to point out that most Nigerians would rather make the most financial gain of a situation than be fair: the attitude of "What is in it for me?" "Ego" in Igbo language means money. The creativity of the playwright also springs forth in "ego-logical". We can also liken this to the political situation in Nigeria where politicians navigate from one party to another for personal reasons, lacking shame and ideology.

Nneka's actions also pits most Nigerian leaders as bad role models, who rather than encourage the people to be fair and straight forward in their conduct, encourage the people to engage in corrupt practices

through their own actions. This may be a reason why in every fragment of the Nigerian society, corruption exists. In summary, Awotoye, Nneka, and Dankwushi represent the distrust and corruption in leadership. The people's submission to bribery from Dankwushi, informs us that the corruption Ododo exposes is not endemic to leadership but also followership. It reflects the situation in Nigeria whereby the electorate accept monetary advances in return for their votes. Simply put, we are all to blame for the decadence in our society.

In Movement II, Scene Two, the prayer points captured by the Chorus reveal the playwright's ideas on what the country needs in order for progress and development to be witnessed. Ododo advocates for a nationalist spirit anchored by equality, fairness, and reason which is a summation of the playwright's ideologies.

Nigeria is often referred to as the giant of Africa because of her political and economic resources. It is axiomatic to say that although Nigeria is blessed with natural resources, good leadership has eluded the nation and serious national development remains to be seen. The argument which ensues between the dentarean leaders reflects the reality which exists in the Nigerian political landscape whereby distrust, disunity, and intolerance have continued to stunt development in the nation.

Colonial Master: I see. If I may ask
Whose head is ready for the crown?
Nneka & Awotoye: Mine! (They look at each other surprised.)
"It is mine" "Mine it is", (They continue their exchange until Colonial Master shouts to stop them.)
Colonial Master: Shut up! See those who want to wear
The crown of authority.
Confused minds. (Laughs mockingly.)
Foolish time wasters. (Ododo 2012: 23)

Here, Ododo challenges Nigerian leaders to stand up to the responsibility of leadership by been unified. This gives insight on their inability to lead, hence, the

military coup which ensues later in the play. In Movement II, Scene One, Awotoye and Dankwushi are frightened by Nneka's arrival at a secret meeting demanding Nneka to ask, "... What kind of heroes are you?" (Ododo 2012: 27). On the surface, it looks like a dialogue between the characters, but looking at it critically, it is as if the playwright is asking Nigerian leaders "what kind of leaders are you?".

The theme of inequality is addressed on two fronts. The playwright explores racial inequality as well as ethnic inequality. The colonial master brags, "I am born to rule" (Ododo 2012: 23). He believes that the dentarean leaders who represent the black race are not born to rule. He affirms this position, "Your black heads too malformed to fit the crown of authority" (Ododo 2012: 20). More obviously he adds, "I'm from a special race whom the crown fits" (Ododo 2012: 23). He also describes the request by the dentarean leaders to honour Mother Earth as "Nonsensical African mumbo-jumbo!!!" (Ododo 2012: 25). The conversations in Movement One of the play provoke the reader to question the unjust treatment of blacks by whites.

The colonial master does not take the affairs of the dentarean leaders seriously because he feels superior and does not feel they demand any serious attention.

Colonial Master: What pact? Oh... the pact of independence... I see. (Ododo 2012: 22)

In Movement II, Scene Five, after the dentarean family have gained independence, the Chorus reveal, "... This marks the beginning of subtle rivalry between the West-East fertility and the desert's oddity. *Dis na* the clear case of Monkey dey work o, baboon dey chop o. God bless Dentarean family" (Ododo 2012: 39). This suggests that the inequality witnessed among the various ethnic divisions or regions in the Nigeria can be traced to independence. Evidently, certain parts of the country contribute more to the development of the country and benefit the least,

while some parts benefit the most but contribute the least. For example, in the past and even till the present day, the people of the Niger Delta area where crude oil is in abundance are not been well compensated by the government. This also relates with the reality of Nigerian leaders enriching themselves with public funds while the citizenry live in abject poverty.

This theme is dealt subtly in Movement II, Scene Five. In this instance, the people representing the minority groups express their interest to join in the merriment of the independence celebration by singing but the dentarean leaders (the majority) decline their request. Although, he directly attacks the inequality experienced in the Nigerian society, this may be a subjective move by Ododo who hails from a minority group in Nigeria.

The theme of unity comes to light in the play in Movement II, Scene Two. The dentarean leaders resist several attempts by the colonial master to vitiate their quest for independence. They remain focused and resolute on their goal.

Colonial Master: (Speaks.) Are you prepared and ready for the business of governance?

Awotoye: Yes, we are prepared.

Dentarean Leaders: And resolved to work together.

Colonial Master: No, you cannot work together.

Dentarean Leaders: Yes, we can work together.

Colonial Master: No.

Dentarean Leaders: Yes.

Colonial Master: No, it can't be so.

Dentarean Leaders: Yes, it will be so.

Colonial Master: It is not possible.

Awotoye: It is possible. (Ododo 2012: 32)

Colonial Master: Because you are different. Different in languages, in cultures and customs. In religions, parallel lines that can never meet. And who says you're not different? (Ododo 2012: 33)

The above extract also captures Nigeria's diversity which is visible through every fabric of society: religion, politics, language, and culture. These social divisions have led to distrust, instability, and underdevelopment. As against the contemporary

capitalist orientation which focuses on the individual, Ododo proposes a shift from the individual to the collective consciousness to enable development and progress to be achieved. The above statements of the dentarean leaders carry the playwright's belief in unity for progress. In the extract below, the words "our" and "together" have an undertone of unity which reveal the playwright's message.

Nneka: Our differences we sink.

Dankwushi: Resolved and ready to work together.

Dentarean Leaders: To free our people, freedom from colonial bondage.

Colonial Master: But you're not bonded. Oh no, no, don't say so!

Dentarean Leaders: But in truth we are bonded. (Ododo 2012: 33)

Their fight continues, "Independence is our desire and we want it now" (Ododo 2012: 33). This statement shows a maturity in the dentarean leaders of not only being unified but knowing what they want. The people sense this confidence and support them, "Bring our flag, the green-white-green flag of unity" (Ododo 2012: 34). The playwright uses this act to show that when people work together for a common goal they succeed. The lowering of the union jack and the raising of the green-white-green flag simultaneously marked the end of British colonialism in Nigeria and the birth of independence (or so we thought). This dramatic action symbolises a reversal of fortune.

This also represented a contrast in fortune for both parties—the colonial master and the dentarean leaders: For the colonial master, it meant a stripping of power and authority; for the dentarean leaders, it signified the bestowment of power and authority. This reversal of fortune is also visible in the tone of the colonial master which dampens as the play progresses. In the early exchanges in the play, the colonial master exhibits an aura of arrogance and control, "Shut up! See those who want to wear the crown of

authority..." (Ododo 2012: 23), but is humbled as the play climaxes, "Easy, easy gentlemen. Take it easy. Dentarean leaders... Alright, blow the trumpet" (Ododo 2012: 34).

As Foucault (1982: 781) observes in his complex article titled "The Subject and Power", we can understand that power can be expressed in difference:

Generally, it can be said that there are three types of struggles: either against forms of domination (ethnic, social, and religious); against forms of exploitation which separates individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way (struggles against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission).

Nigeria is a plural society and the playwright informs this in the play. In Movement IV, Scene One, the dentarean leaders pray in their respective religious ways. Dankwushi recites his Qur'an, Nneka engages in Christian songs and prayers and Awotoye performs traditional rites. In Nigeria, Islam, Christianity, and traditional worshipping are thought to be the three most popular modes of worship. Although, in recent times, Eckankar: The religion of the Light and Sound of God has risen in standings to become the third most popular religion in Nigeria relegating the traditional religions.

Nigeria is a multi-religious nation and irrelevant of religion or tradition, Nigerians believe in God or a higher force that oversees the actions and determines the fate or destiny of all creation. This hints at the essentialist part of African culture to believe in a higher force which directs the lives of the people. This has been captured in several African plays, notable mentions include Ola Rotimi's *Kurumi* and *The Gods Are not to Blame*, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, and many others. There are many references to God in the play to show the significance Nigerians and Africans in general place on a higher force.

The play ends on an interesting note because there

is no clear resolution. A technique which allows for serious critical reflection on the part of the reader. Strategically, the readers are drawn into an imaginative exercise of unfolding the very salient points of the plot to question the decisions and choices of the characters in the play, and then conceptualizing what they feel is the next step. By so doing, they are responding to the text. This corresponds with the Brechtian alienation concept in theatre which encourages the audience to meet dramatized actions with their own critical input and not to be engulfed in the dramatic process.

CONCLUSIONS

Ododo uses his historical account to lampoon the political class and provide a wakeup call for the masses who need to do more than stare. Ododo's position in his play is borne out of a collapse in cultural values in the Nigerian society. It is a conscious attempt by the playwright to sensitize the readers on the dangers of corruption and exploitation and instil the right values of equality, unity, and fairness to enhance national development. It is within this premise that one can confidently claim that the playwright is a conscious individual representing ideologies: an ideologue. The playwright is a window to society, through his pane we view our own world and make meaning of it. From the Tableau of the play, the readers are thrown into Ododo's ideological furnace which sets the mood and agenda of the plot.

The findings are that the playwright consciously expresses his thoughts through his characters by manipulating their dialogue to align with his ideological position on issues. While some characters exhibit the vices he preaches against, others advocate for the values he seeks to encourage. Although we cannot measure the playwright's influence on society without carrying out another research, it can be deduced that by exposing the ills in society through dramatic expressions, the playwright influences the

salient issues for reflection and public debate thereby setting the agenda. We can draw some insight from McCombs and Shaw's (1999) study of political campaigns, using the agenda-setting function of mass media:

While the mass media may have little influence on the direction or intensity of attitudes, it is hypothesized that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues.

The truth is consciously and unconsciously, playwrights engage in agenda-setting through the thematic treatment of their plays. As Uka (2010: 227) opines, "... An artist may essentially provide no easy panaceas to the evils of power politics and conflicts, but he can, armed with more objectified perception, open or provide insights into social problems which insights could melt consciences and refine sentiments". However, the author agrees with Ibagere and Omoera (2010) that dramatists must not only mirror society but mobilize the populace in the fight against the ills in society. To really influence social construction, Nigerian playwrights must move from change beyond the text and act.

To actually realise the goal of sensitizing the public or society, the author recommends that satirical plays like this should be adopted for television so that the leadership and followership alike can be constantly reawakened to the socio-political situation in the nation. Stage plays are effective as well but cannot reach a wider audience.

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