

From Liberal to Radical Praxis: An Examination of Ola Rotimi's Ideological Shift

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines Ola Rotimi's ideological leaning in his artistic career. The paper avers that Rotimi bestrides the two generations of Nigerian playwrights - the liberal conservative generation and the radical generation. His early plays especially, *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, which itself is an adaptation of Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, place him in the same ideological class with Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo and Wale Ogunyemi. The plays of these first generation playwrights are rooted in African traditional beliefs. The plays focus mainly on the forces of fate and destiny, ignoring the plight of the common people in the society. The paper however, argues that *If... A Tragedy of the Ruled* and *Hopes of the Living Dead* have elevated Rotimi to the same ideological class with Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Tunde Fatunde, Olu Obafemi and Kole Omotoso. This paper concludes that by this elevation, Rotimi has shifted ground in his artistic career from a liberal conservative ideological stance to a radically committed ideological praxis to unveil the sufferings of the masses and proffer solutions to them. This shift in Rotimi's artistic career from his rather quasi commitment to a committed ideological praxis is geared towards the liberation of man.

Keywords: Radical Praxis, fate, destiny, belief, Nigerian Playwrights, Society.

I. INTRODUCTION

Olawale Rotimi is one of the best known Nigerian playwrights. He was born at Sapele on 3rd April, 1938; trained at the Methodist High School Lagos, Boston University, and at Yale where his first play, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, won the Yale Major Play of the Year award in 1966.

Rotimi bestrides the two generations of Nigerian playwrights – the liberal conservative generation and the radical generation. His early plays place him among the first generation playwrights, that is, the liberal conservative generation, with Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, and Wale Ogunyemi as his compatriots. Wole Soyinka is considered to be the most outstanding in this group. Most of his works are drawn from traditional Yoruba beliefs, mythology, history and folklore. These traditional elements are artistically blended with the features of classical drama. The contributions of the first generation playwrights to the development of modern Nigerian drama is associated with the works of Soyinka much of whose creative output has been a source of inspiration to many of his compatriots.

However, many critics of the Marxist persuasion are quite unsparing in their criticism of Soyinka's Ideological leaning. According to Aliu Seiza, the critics claim that "Soyinka's society looks for Saviours that never come and that his purported saviour is usually conceived in the light of the traditional 'scape-goat' who is expected to carry away the sins of the society through ritual death (8)." Such is the fate of Eman, in *The Strong Breed*. The play narrates the story of Eman, who lives in a strange village and has to sacrifice his life in order to save the village, a tragedy that ends with an individual sacrifice for the sake of the communal cleansing. Wole Soyinka is believed to be an ardent traditionalist, a culturist that emphasize the heritage, potency of African culture and tradition in his dramaturgy (74).

Ola Rotimi's *The God's are not to Blame*, which is an adaptation of the famous Greek play, *king Oedipus*, is also rooted in African traditional belief- the belief in the forces of fate and destiny. It is believed that these forces determine what direction our lives swings. In *The Gods Are not to Blame*, the Yoruba king Odewale, an African Oedipus, is tragically defeated, not so much by the gods as by tribal conflicts which he cannot resolve; his failure of leadership, rather than inexorable fate, is a modern version of the Oedipus myth for an African audience, and exhorts Africans not to blame the gods (i.e. the superpowers) for their own political shortcomings. In *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, Ola Rotimi employs history to unearth the past, thereby

reconstructing the present and taking a peep into the future (351). These plays deal with the pre-colonial experiences of Nigerians in the past.

Rotimi demonstrated an unfaltering interest in historical drama. He uses historical materials in his plays to avail his audience with the knowledge of the past for the reconstruction or social engineering of the present and the future (150-151). In *If...A Tragedy of the Ruled* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*, Rotimi's craftsmanship has taken a new dimension. In these plays, Rotimi has demonstrated signs of radical growth to the extent that he is now on a firm ideological ground, a position which contrasts him with his ideologically backward historical tragedies. Like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. Rotimi has shifted ground in his artistic productions from a position of quasi commitment to that of firm commitment.

In *If...* Rotimi has confronted his audience with the social and economic tensions in Nigeria to enable him make fundamental dramatic statements that proffer meaning and insight into the conduct of politics and its impact on the oppressed (153). The background events that provide the story is the return to civil rule in 1979. It is the eve of the voting day when all Nigerians will go to the polls to elect a civilian government. However, for the inmates of a multi-tenanted building where different tribes and classes live, it is a different story. They are threatened with quit notices from their landlord who wants to intimidate and blackmail them into voting for him in his bid to win a senatorial seat.

From the play, we find that the intellectuals comprising the lawyer, doctors and teachers who live in the multi-tenanted building were ready to educate their co-tenants on the need to remain united in solidarity so as to be able to fight their common enemy—their landlord and other oppressors. They reminded the tenants the fact that once their solidarity is broken, the landlord will find it easier to deal with them on their individual capacities and defeat them. There is therefore the need for them to work together to achieve their collective interest by voting for the candidate whom they feel will work to improve their lives (16). Thus, almost to a man, including those who are not served with the quit notices, the tenants forget their differences and come together in solidarity under the able leadership of Papa to oppose the oppressive predilection and high-handedness of their landlord. According to the retired teacher.

...we must let the landlord know that we all here are one. If because we refuse to take oaths to vote for him in the coming elections, this now is his way of punishing us, fair enough. But let him punish all of us. No exceptions. I see divide and rule tactics at work here, and we must resist them at all costs. (13)

The tenants resolve to bide for time to enable them to take the matter to court for adjudication. Meanwhile, they unanimously mandate papa to write a strong letter to the landlord protesting against the quit notices as well as the hike in rents. All the tenants are equally advised not to pay above the usual twenty naira. Rotimi believes that to reassert their humanity the oppressed masses must be in solidarity to rescue themselves from 'the forces of exploitation that have long gripped them in the strangle-hold of an inguinal hernia' (16). But this is dependent on several conditions predicated on the big IF. That is:

If the masses, the oppressed masses again for a change will use their votes as tools for their own freedom. If that fails, then mass-struggle becomes imperative (16).

Unfortunately, at the end of the play, the poor masses are unable to bring the desired change through the ballot box. The desire to destroy the notorious oppressive capitalist system through electoral politics has been frustrated by the very capitalists who have the muscle and the wherewithal to twist things in their favour.

If... has several sub plots and themes. The asthmatic bouts of Onyema, Mama's fortieth marriage arrangement and sickness are all subplots and themes that are embedded in this drama that emphasizes the importance of unity in diversity. Closely related to the theme of solidarity is that of exploitation, positive leadership and self reliance. The theme of solidarity is built through the tenants, the poor masses described as the "Chosified" beings. The tenants are a microcosm of the nation, each coming from a tribal nucleus that has formed the federation of Nigeria. Akpan, Chinwe and Dokubo are from the East, Mallam Garuba Kazaure and Dr. Hamidu alias Che Guevara are from the North while Banji and Betty are from the West and Mid-West respectively. In spite of their linguistic, cultural and religious differences, they have all come together as a team to fight a common enemy, their callous landlord. The Marxist Hamidu articulates this theme of solidarity in the following words.

...Solidarity. The day our solidarity dissolves is the day our humanity ends and our worthlessness begins... Nobody should be deemed useless in a struggle against oppression. Not even our already chosified brother here. – Garuba. The same goes for Betty. And you... Chinwe, and me, and all of us. Nobody is useless (16-17).

If... also highlights the power of the masses in rectifying a corrupt judiciary or the law courts through electoral politics. Papa articulates this view with emphatic clarity.

.. A forthright judiciary is a reflection of the confidence it derives from the ethics of the people. The people then are the last hope for save guarding that ethics through the kinds of persons they put in power. That is the language you must speak tomorrow. With your votes. You know the candidates... anything short of this language, any vote cast for a politician tomorrow on the basis of sheer fatherhood by birth: or of brotherhood by

clan; or sisterhood by religion is your doom. Our last hope then, is in a sound government that will inspire a forthright judiciary before which we'll present our case. That's all. (14-15).

The theme of exploitation is illustrated through Garuba and the poor stranded fisherman. Garuba kazaure is a pathetic victim of the capitalist system. With nothing other than his bare hands to earn a living, Garuba took to boxing in the night and carrying cement in the daytime. In a commonwealth title fight, he killed his opponent and that was his doom. In the words of Hamidu,

...That was the end of his dream, his hopes, his humanity. Thenceforth, he withdrew from boxing, withdrew from life himself, shutting himself up in what in medicine we call hysteria neurosis. How about that? A once healthy and normal man simply stopped talking, stopped hearing. It is the system. The notoriously impelling capitalist system has driven him to a career he basically hadn't the heart for. And having got him there, the system maneuvered him to a corner, then charged him with the must bestial of capitalist impulses: Wipe out the competitor which he did practically and cleanly. Finally the system again welcomes him back. Now a new man. The way the system prefers him to be- a new man totally dehumanized. Totally chosified... A chosified being. A man no more a man but: a THING! (17).

IF... is a radically committed play. Having being inspired by the wastages and recklessness of the second Republic, Rotimi has turned his attention from historical plays to socially committed drama to unveil the suffering of the ordinary people, their aspirations, their frustrations, their feelings and the neglect and deprivation that they suffer.

Hopes of the living Dead

Hopes of the living Dead is a radical dramatic parable fashioned out of historical events that rocked Nigeria in the middle of the 20th century. Though a product of historical events of the colonial era, *Hopes of the Living Dead*, is Ola Rotimi's attempt to express his distaste with the leaders of the post- independence era in Nigeria. (41). *Hopes of the living Dead* is based on events in colonial Nigeria of 1924. In that year Harcourt Ikoli. Whyte and forty other lepers were kept in Port-Harcourt General Hospital for an experiment on a cure for leprosy. Although initially granted official recognition, the experiment soon, became unpopular with regular patients who felt that their already bad health was being jeopardized more by their exposure to the lepers. They were able to stir members of the public to become hostile to Dr. Fergusson's experiment. They kicked against that kind of experiment in a regular hospital. As a result, Dr Fergusson eventually abandoned the research and left for his home Scotland. The leprosy patients were therefore left in a state of hopelessness and helplessness. They were left without a doctor to attend to them. They were at the mercy of the British colonial administration and the hospital authorities. They were to be flushed out by the hospital authorities. At this juncture, the leprosy patients looked within themselves for a solution to this nascent problem. In the bid to exercise their right of existence before a complacent and conscienceless society, they mobilized themselves and came together under the able leadership of Harcourt Whyte who made them to believe that their success lay within the collective dialectic rather than within the individual.

Hopes of the Living Dead essentially concentrates on the discourse of leadership failure in post-independence Nigeria (87). In using the play to address the Nigerian situation, Ola Rotimi is able to make explicit statements informed and carried through by a passion, and Intellect which is also evident in his other works. This in the words of Utoh Tracie ,

is because, having been freed from the limitations of non-fiction, he is able to empty the tool of drama as a weapon to address the political, social and economic problems of the nation (42).

He equates the Nigerian society to a leprosy colony, with all the antecedent problems associated with leprosy in the Nigerian society. In addressing the problems of the nation, the play attempts to trace the origin of those problems. Harcourt white makes this observation:

H.W: This is how it begins. Good Lord in Heaven! This is how... an itch--only a slight itching. On the hand. A little scratch. That's all. The next time, a disease comes forth too heavy to bear. There stands a great Oak tree. Before then, a sapling, weak and lonely. A simple seed gave it birth (40).

With this speech, Ola Rotimi takes us back to 1st October, 1960 when Nigeria gained her independence. This marked the beginning of self rule and naturally the period produced an upsurge of indigenous politicians. Thus the first republic came into being. Concerning the politicians, Ayo Akınwale has this to say:

It is now common knowledge that the performance of the post-independence first republic Nigerian politicians was nothing to write home about. Greed, corruption, tribalism, intrigues, betrayals and carpet crossing characterized the body polity of the country. (19)

The indigenous leader, instead of actualizing the dreams of millions who looked up to them, only stepped into the political positions vacated by their colonial counterparts and then turned round to live on the sweat of the people. The dream held by the masses before independence was that the indigenous leaders would gallantly free them from colonial oppression and restore the people's dismantled cultural structures where land, food and wealth are for the entire community. In the community, both the rich and poor, the foolish and the wise, the

learned and the illiterate, are free to take part in the life of the community in all its ramifications. But then, this was only a dream. As Ngugi wa Thiongo' puts it, "independence to the peasants and urban workers means a period of gradual disillusionment. Independence has not given them back their land. They are still without food and clothes" (56).

Hopes of the living Dead opens on a rather eerie note of uncertainty and apprehension. As the curtains unfold, we see Harcourt Whyte taking off rather hastily to see Dr Fergusson. As soon as he returns from seeing Dr. Fergusson, Whyte gathers all the inmates together and informs them that their medical officer, Dr. Ferguson, would be leaving the country. To convey the hopelessness of their situation and desperation in the event of Dr Fergusson's going, he puts it bluntly to the inmates in the following words:

From now on, we are alone... We fool ourselves if we believe that the big men of this place will care for us as before. We fool ourselves if we think the world outside will give us peace to continue to be as of one blood, together, in this place. Children of our fathers, our struggle has begun (21).

Medical attention for the inmates stops soon after Dr. Fergusson leaves the country, and out of insecurity the inmates start squeezing into tribal groups. However, in order to forestall their being expelled from the hospital and ensure continuous medical attention, the inmates of the leprosy wards decide to petition the chief Medical Superintendent in Lagos. Furthermore to avoid unnecessary disputation among them and consequent division, Harcourt Whyte and the Chief clerk are chosen as their leaders who subsequently carry out all negotiations on their behalf. The support given to these two enables them to ferry the lepers through tumultuous waters. Thus, in spite of individual weaknesses, they pool together the little left within them and this becomes a fountain of profound wisdom, strength and power to prop them up in their struggle.

The climatic point of the play is the attempt by the hospital authorities, aided by the police-agents of the colonial administration, to forcefully eject the lepers from the leprosy wards. The superintendent who is the symbol of colonial authority gives the patients twenty four hours within which they should not only clear out of the premises of the General Hospital but also from the periphery of Port Harcourt city. This intimidator posture of the repressive colonial authority and the emerging Nigerian petit-bourgeois could not, however, silence the lepers. Their collective wish for self-determination is conveyed in Harcourt Whyte's words:

We shall wait! And there's no question, ours shall be victory in the struggle to live... like... freemen Why? Because, try as it might, this world shall never find chains strong enough to tie down freedom. (49)

Thus, in the physical combat that ensues between the police and the lepers, the lepers in spite of their handicap grunt, kick, weep, and shove and succeed in having a settlement set up for them at Uzuakoli, "a place we call our own". With the triumph, the lepers become ennobled in their collective desire to wrest the humanity that they have lost to their oppressors.

Ola Rotimi's Standpoint

It is pertinent to reiterate the fact that in *Hopes of the Living Dead*, the conflict is not between individuals and their personal desires but between social forces. According to Gbilekaa, the Nigerian government is presented in this allegory as:

Being despotic, terrorizing the poor suffering masses, the downtrodden, the rural peasants of the Nigerian society whose desperation is likened to the deadly leprosy disease (164).

Rotimi therefore uses leprosy and the lepers' revolt of 1924 as a metaphor to show that the lepers struggle against colonial administration was aimed at discovering and asserting their humanity which they achieved with the establishment of a leprosy centre for them at Uzuakoli. This settlement is achieved through the dynamism and able leadership of Harcourt Whyte.

Hopes of the Living Dead, therefore, is not a play about leprosy or the disabled. Ola Rotimi uses the play to point out the most glaring fact about the African situation. The exit of Dr Fergusson out of the lives of the lepers, in the words of Utoh :

provides a strong metaphor of the leadership saga of post- independence Africa. With his exit, Rotimi is able to appropriately and successfully place the blame on the door step of the indigenous leaders (44).

Utoh observes that the struggle is no longer against the colonial masters but our black brothers who have taken over power from the colonial masters, and encourages the people to rise up in collective, sustained rebellion against the oppressors. All over Africa, the story is the same. The oppressors are no longer the colonial masters but our black brothers who took over the reigns of governance. This represents the Nigerian situation, the Ghanaian situation, the Cameroonian situation, the Gambian situation, in fact, the prevalent situation in the continent of Africa. Rotimi uses the play to point out the possible inevitable outcome and reaction which such sustained oppression can elicit.

As a dramatic parable, *Hopes of the Living Dead*, uses the collective struggle of the lepers to underline the fact that political, economic and human domination can be overcome collectively and not individually. This collective struggle can be achieved through a pedagogical process of mass consciousness. This process of

conscientization which is set in motion by Harcourt Whyte, Court Clerk, Hannah and Mallam awakens the dead (the lepers) to the concrete realities surrounding their situation. Thus, Rotimi like Soyinka believes that the man dies in him who remains silent in the face of tyranny. In other words, leprosy as a dramatic metaphor for socio political and psychological malaise though deadly and wears a thousand faces, can be overcome through a workable praxis by the downtrodden--who are their own best doctors--that is, if they are ready to take up arms to deliver themselves from the leprosarium of economic and psychological dominance.

What Rotimi is saying is that for any meaningful progress to be made, the masses' critical consciousness must be awakened, they must learn to question received truths handed down to them by the ruling elite if they are to deliver themselves from their oppressors. Thus, in the course of re-asserting themselves in the face of tyranny and oppression, the lepers reject sympathy and demand for their rights. They no more see themselves as underdogs but as the very equals of their oppressors.

Rotimi tries to reawaken the consciousness of the masses, getting them set for the task ahead. Hence, in the words of Mabel Evwierhoma (2002) "the call for a radical reorientation is heeded by the tenants in the building in *If...* and the inmates of the leprosy ward in *Hopes of the Living Dead*" (2).

Rotimi's Marxist vision is fashioned on solid historical facts- a familiar terrain that has been his source material. This historical facts are used as a mirror and parallel of the present struggle of the masses for a more democratic existence, and it is illuminated with great artistic finesse. Indeed. *If...* does not only stir us to anger against an oppressive political and economic set up, it actually leads us out, it shows the road to paradise only that the road is rough.

IV. CONCLUSION

Our analysis of *If...* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*, has revealed that Rotimi really bestrides the two generations of Nigerian playwrights – the liberal conservative generation and the radical generation. His early plays place him among the first generation playwrights, that is, the liberal conservative generation, with Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, and Wale Ogunyemi as his compatriots . However, *If...* and *Hopes of the Living Dead* have elevated Rotimi to the same ideological class with Osofisan, Sowande, Omotoso and other committed dramatists. In these two plays, Rotimi sees revolution as the only way to overthrow the unjust society and therefore recover their lost humanity. Thus, unlike his earlier plays such as *Kurunmi*, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, Rotimi's *If...* and *Hopes Of the Living Dead* are radically committed plays. In these plays, Rotimi has turned his attention to socially committed drama to unveil the suffering of the masses and proffer solutions to their problems. This position is seen as a shift in Rotimi's artistic career from his rather quasi commitment to a committed ideological praxis geared towards the liberation of man.

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