

Humanising the Dehumanised Collective Pedagogy in Nwamuo's *The Prisoners*

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Abstract: this paper aims to analyse dehumanising and frustrating condition of living in the prisons as demonstrated by Nwamuo so as to throw light on the need for the application of collective pedagogy in effecting changes and meaningful development in the society.

Key words: dehumanising; Nwamuo; prisoners

1. INTRODUCTION

If the artist is anything, he is a human being with heightened sensitivities, he must be aware of the faintest nuisances of injustice in human relations. The African writer cannot therefore be unaware of or indifferent to the monumental injustice which his people suffer (Achebe 79).

The dramatist is a part of humanity. He does not live in outer space, nor operates in a vacuum. He lives and dies in the same society as the clergy... He therefore has his society and the objects therein as raw materials to make his contributions to humanity...his contributions being his creative output (Emeana 15).

Historically, high levels of dehumanizing and frustrating conditions have bedeviled Africa and Nigeria as a nation. Nigeria also has been badly entangled in the web of human rights violation by its leaders, military and civilian. The living conditions in the inside wall (prisons) are appalling and paralleled the situation of life in the outside wall of Nigeria. Currently, Nigerians are not only physically in prison but socially, economically, politically and psychologically in jail. The country is filled with people whose human rights are systematically violated. The demoralizing, dehumanizing and frustrating living conditions of Nigerian prisons manifest in conditions such as overcrowding, poor sanitation, lack of food and medicines and denial of contact with families, which all fall short of the UN standards for the treatment of prisoners. In many Nigerian prisons inmates sleep in a bed of two to six springs or on the floor in filthy cells. Toilets are blocked and overflowing or simply nonexistent, and there is no running water. As a result, disease is widespread (Dinar 1).

African and Nigerian writers, poets, playwrights and critics have variously x-rayed the dehumanizing

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and frustrating living conditions of prisons, they seem to agree that the same maladies plague the prisons on the continent, specifically, Nigerian prisons. The awareness has raised socio-political consciousness among the writers and critics who have tried with their works to expose the injustice of confinement, poor living condition and treatment given to prisoners. Notable among these writers are Jack Mapanje of Malawi, Henrique of Angola, Dennis Brutus of South Africa, Wole Soyinka and Chris Nwamuo of Nigeria, among many others. These writers and critics vehemently attack the injustice and general malaise. They have articulated their passionate concerns for the amelioration of inhuman conditions and radical change through reformations, individually or collectively. It is in the light of the above scenario that the positions of Achebe and Emeana cited at the beginning of the paper become applicable. These two inspiring submissions emphatically encapsulate the dramatist's unavoidable and consistent preoccupations with the culture of humanism, denouncing the oppression of the 'little man' by the 'big man' and in this stride they jettison fatalism and take decisive steps to change destiny, collectively.

In our opinion, Nwamuo is one of those African dramatists whose passionate concerns for the derogation of individual freedom and basic humanism is inseparable. Perhaps, *The Prisoners* is a unique compact embodiment of Nwamuo's consistent courtship with the themes of man's inhumanity to his fellow man, oppression and victimization. In the light of this realization, this paper aims to analyze dehumanizing and frustrating condition of living in the prisons as demonstrated by Nwamuo so as to throw light on the need for the application of collective pedagogy in effecting changes and meaningful development in the society.

2. NWAMUO'S DRAMATURGY

Chris Nwamuo is more popularly known with his stupendous contributions to theatre management and arts administration. However, without attrition he combines this with being a successful playwright, poet and director. Significantly, he has collaborated with leading authorities in theatre in the US and UK, particularly, with Michael Etherton, John Pick, Ted Brann, Patti Gillespie, Martin Banhan, Geoffrey Axworthy, Howard Davis, Linda Ludwin and Francis Reid (Nwamuo 41-42).

As a dramatist, Nwamuo believes in the potentiality of the arts, particularly, theatrical and dramatic arts to entertain agitate the mind, influence attitudinal change and meaningful development in any society. This tread streams through his plays, namely *The Prisoners*, *The Squeeze*, *The Substitute*, *The Wisdom of the King*, *Save Our Lives* and *The Last Song*. Unequivocally, it is his appreciation of dramatic arts and theatrical forms as reliable advocate of humanistic and conscientious tribunal that informs Nwamuo's dramaturgy. Perhaps, Nwamuo has never been detained, confined to a match box cell or served any prison sentence but his personal experiences during the Nigerian civil war, his working experiences and social rapport with the rulers and the ruled, oppressed and oppressors alike in Nigeria or elsewhere may have conditioned his conceptualization of the play, *The Prisoners*. Thus, the essence of investigating Nwamuo's *The Prisoners* is to highlight the implications of collective pedagogy in enhancing social change and development in the society.

3. THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF COLLECTIVE PEDAGOGY

In liberation literature generally and radical theatre studies in particular, collective pedagogy is a regular concept which is applied as means of conscientization (consciousness-raising), a term first used by the Brazilian educator, activist, and theorist Paulo Freire in his world classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this book Freire discusses largely the justification for the pedagogy of the oppressed; the contradiction between the oppressors and the oppressed, and how it is overcome; oppression and the oppressors;

oppression and the oppressed. He asserts that liberation is neither a gift nor a self-achievement, but a mutual process. And in the place of the 'banking' system of education which is an instrument of oppression, he proposes a problem-posing concept of collective pedagogy which is an instrument for liberation. His search for dialogic – the essence of education as the practice of freedom is central to this theory of action. Collective pedagogy therefore involves *collective* teaching and thinking through together among the vectors of revolutionary change. The basic essence is to 'unsettle' the already settled and indeed defeatist or fatalistic mindsets of the oppressed class. This level of action is known as praxis intervention, which in drama is initiated by the dramatist himself on behalf of his subjects as a way of making them to have a fresh look at the world around them and intervene. In this process the people are helped to reflexively recognise the arbitrary and discriminating mindsets within themselves and the world around and working towards correcting it. It is what Eve Bannet (1989) sees as a practical method of "objectifying objectification" on a collective basis.¹ This method has been adapted as fruitful in working with the marginalized people as marginalisation is usually a historical phenomenon. This would avoid people losing self-respect and dignity under the conditions of marginalisation as we have in *The Prisoners*.

4. THE PRISONERS

According to the playwright, the play is set in the recent past, in the home front where the activities of the war are not greatly felt except for occasional motor sounds, hunger and insecurity of lives and property. In a nutshell, the play dramatizes the extent to which human patience can be stretched, as the prisoners representing the oppressed masses by the weight of leadership try to show (*Prisoners* vi-vii). The play exposes the injustice of confinement, the poor living conditions, and treatment given in prison in Nigeria, which falls short of United Nations and Amnesty International Standards for the treatment of prisoners.

The play is about soldiers who for different reasons absconded from the war without official permission. These soldiers are branded "AWOL", meaning "Away Without Leave". Consequently, they are arrested and subjected to confinement in jail, the traditional treatment meted to soldiers in such situations. While in confinement, the awols are systematically denied of basic human rights. Therefore, in the play, the living conditions typical of the prisons and which forms the central theme and conflict are x-rayed. They are denied of food, water, medicines and contact with families. More so, the assorted relief materials from charitable organizations and the food directorate are simply denied the prisoners and diverted for the prison officers' personal use. The play therefore exposes the greedy, selfish desires of the prison officials. In the light of this inhuman treatment, the play espouses the collective will of the awols to take decisive steps and collectively break the chains of oppression rather than waiting for divine intervention. The play therefore demonstrates the fact that dramatic art is a tool for change because it sensitizes the individual on the condition on the society, promote new ideas, and point to a new way of life, change and progressive development.

5. HUMANISING THE DEHUMANISED, ARMING THE DISARMED: COLLECTIVE PEDAGOGY IN *THE PRISONERS*

The play begins with a prologue in which the dehumanizing and frustrating conditions of the downtrodden bound in chains are exposed. Significantly, the second stanza presents the inhuman condition of life of the masses represented by the prisoners.

They run as they stop
Hungry and tired

The burden of the world
On their sweet weary backs (Prisoners 1).

The fourth, fifth and sixth stanzas further depict the plight of the masses who are working and sweating hard to survive as the wheel of change continue to roll, killing them with the brown dust of life.

The full text of the play is divided into four movements. The first movement opens with four unkempt war prisoners referred to as “stragglers” or awols who are dressed in calico with their hairs shaved. The prisoners, namely Obi, Buchi, Onwu, are busy cutting grasses under the heat of the sun as punishment. They are singing a song that further highlights their present status. The first movement exposes the demoralizing, dehumanized, oppressive and frustrating living conditions of Nigerian prisons, characterized by lack of food, water and medicine. Obi is made to ask the million naira question: “Oh! The sun is too hot. Must we continue to live like this forever? Why don’t they draft us into the battlefield instead?” (4). He adds:

Yes, I think it’s better to die of bullets in the front than of hunger in the rear. I mean ...how can one face the wrath of God on judgement day, knowing he died of mere hunger? Come to think of it. How can a common Corporal make us – four hefty men – work around his house for almost a whole week without food, without water. It is indeed better to die? (sic) (5).

Also in Movement One, Onwu is made to present and ridicule the greedy, wicked and oppressive desires of the prison officials like the Superintendent (PS), Sergeant (Nnedu) and prison Corporal (Boko) who have commandeered and diverted relief materials and food meant for the prisoners for their personal satisfaction. Onwu and Buchi express this greedy attitude very concisely.

Onwu: What really baffles me is why the Superintendent, Sergeant and the Corporal should deny us food at all, when the store is filled up with stockfish, yams, rice, beans, garri ... I hear that as a detachment, we are entitled to a great quantity of food items, but we see what... (6).

Buchi: I wonder why they say God is just, when he allows this inhumanity to persist in our society unchecked! What belongs to us is commandeered by a few rich people (11).

Onwu: I think the reason for our not having food is that the Superintendent and his men sell out our food items for money (12).

Movement One also presents the prisoners struggling with the issue of fatalism and making efforts to take decisive steps to break the chains, principally, to change their destinies and the society. Obi and Onwu are made to demonstrate this great moment of decision and action.

Obi: Come here Mezie and listen very attentively. What would you have us do? Die or fast for forty days and nights like your Father in heaven? Look here Mezie, the days are gone when miracles happened. You don’t expect to fold your arms and get food from these stingy officers. Stop your sermons and try to help yourself. Heaven help those who help themselves. Haven’t you heard that before?

Onwu: ...I can pray, preach more than any of your pastors but preaching wouldn’t get me any food now foolish man. It will be stupidity for us to sit and expect food to walk...to us (18-19).

This process of collectively striving against structurally ingrained discrimination, oppression and repression is a practical method in collective pedagogy. It is a means of self-intervention, a systematic ‘participant objectivation’ (to appropriate Eve Bannet’s terminology) as against fatalism.²

In Movement Two, the playwright lampoons the greedy orgy of public looting by public servants

represented here by the prison superintendent (PS), prison sergeant and prison corporal and this makes great impact on the masses (prisoners) and the larger society. The dialogue between PS, Nnedu and Stella, sum up the human rights violation, corruption and injustice occurring in the prison (society).

PS: Okay! Arrange to send one to my house and supply two bales to the chief who paid for them eh. I think I am running short of rice too. (Pause) Send a bag to my house. I must eat you know. (Laughs). It is not easy being alive to see this war through.

Nnedu: No Sir, in or house Sir. I mean for us to eat.

PS: Okay eh – m... Share one bag with Corporal Boko. Okay?
(23-24).

As action shifts to Movement Three the prisoners are relishing in the booties of the successful looting of the prison's store the previous night. The scene blows into an altercation between Nnedu and the awols over the missing guard and the missing relief materials from the prison's store. Some moral questions necessarily arise here in relation to Nwamuo's humanism. The prisoners' incarceration is a result of their escape from the war front and raping some girls who refused to be enlisted in the militia. These same prisoners are engaged in looting. Are these the kind of heroes the playwright wishes us to align with in our re-arming for the much vaunted revolution? Granted that their latest action is a reaction to the more organized looting by prison officials which might be excused as a product of the debased system; however, when we recall the past, we may begin to tread with cautious unease and even suspicion. Thus while we may not build on the past of these vectors of change, we may then see them merely as the debased products of an exceptionally debased superstructure.

In Movement Four, the stakes are finally turned as the AWOLs who have ended their penitence are bent on challenging the obnoxious and oppressive system of the prison authority. They are desirous to take over power, principally, to change their destiny and the society. The prisoners are seen conspiring and putting finishing touches to their collective plan of action. The scene flows into the moment when Mezie (the born-again Christian) realizes the need to jettison overboard the fatalistic belief of waiting for manna from heaven, and to join hands with his fellow prisoners to challenge the obnoxious, oppressive, and inhuman prison system towards positive change for the benefit of all. In the words of Mezie:

I am alright. The death of six of our fellow prisoners (Pause). The punishment you got two days ago (Pause). The other forms of mal-treatment meted out to us have touched my conscience, and opened my eyes to the realities of our situation brothers (Pause). Our actions may force the officers change their attitude towards their less fortunate brethren, the down-trodden (sic), the underdogs in our society (48).

The playwright uses this scene to bring to limelight the need for collective or collaborative action of all and sundry to challenge all oppressive regimes and tendencies in order to change our destinies, change the society and make it a better place for all. It is this stage, through a period of much consciousness-raising, that Mezie the hitherto detached Christian changes his costume of lethargy to join his comrades in the rehearsal for the revolution. Evidently, the result of this intervention in theory and practice is that Mezie experiences material changes which flow from the reflexive self-monitoring that eventually produces renewal needed for the collective spirit of the struggle. Again, in this instance we recall Augusto Boal's recipe for breaking of repression in his experiment with the dominated people of Peru.

The technique of breaking repression consists in asking a participant to remember a particular moment when he felt especially repressed, accepted that repression, and began to act in a manner

contrary to his own desires (Boal 150).

The transformation of Mezie is a deft creation of the playwright. The time for this transformation is taken perhaps because of the crucial role he has to play in the final revolution that upstages the oppressors.

The play ends with an epilogue which the playwright titles "Drama for Four Bound in Chains". It is presented like a poem in fourteen stanzas. In the epilogue, Nwamuo laments the hijacking of power by the rich to the detriment of the downtrodden; more so, he identifies the class structure of the Nigerian state, viz the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, the democratic and the aristocratic. It emphatically implies that in our society, there exist the conflict of interests among the various classes in their objectives and pursuits of livelihood. Thus, in the fifth stanza, the contradiction between the oppressed and the oppressors is re-echoed. The playwright reiterates that the conflict of interests is between the oppressed and the oppressors over the issue of human rights and property rights, and the triumph of human rights.

The eighth and ninth stanzas present a strong social statement on the need for humanism; a humanism that defines the playwright's ideological vision in the play as in his entire dramatic oeuvre. Accordingly, he argues that the prison officials, the prisoners, the oppressor and the oppressed, the rulers and the ruled, the capitalist bourgeois and the proletariat (downtrodden) are all human beings and brothers like Cain and Abel. So there is no need for the division, neither is there any need for man's inhumanity to man. The speechifying at this stage also makes Nwamuo's drama pass for a drama of preachment and it strictly conforms to the literature of commitment which holds that a writer must take sides in that he is either with the oppressed for liberation or the oppressor against the former. However, it is apparent where our dramatist belongs – the first group!

It is not surprising therefore that in the tenth stanza, the playwright is optimistic that the less fortunate brethren will surely stand up, either in our environment and fearlessly cry our hearts out, and jointly struggle for our liberation, independence and total salvation from the oppressors and oppressive tendencies. In the twelfth stanza, the playwright presents a clarion call to all men of goodwill, with an ounce of honesty and humanity, particularly, the artists to use the dramatic arts or the art of theatre as a social weapon and vehicle to propagate the continuous struggle to eliminate man's inhumanity to man. They must use their works to humanize the dehumanized, change the society, where equality, equity, fair play and justice shall reign supreme. Nwamuo does not mince words, therefore, when he asserts:

there is no man
with an ounce of honesty
in his costume and make-up
who fails to recognize
that there is a continuous struggle
between the two classes:
the prisoner and they that imprison him (70).

His submission concurs with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's wisdom that a good theatre should be "that which is on the side of the people, that which without making mistakes and weaknesses, gives people courage and urges them to higher resolves" (Ngugi 103). More so, Nwamuo's assertion significantly conforms to Antonin Artaud's thesis that theatre

Drives human beings to see themselves as they are, lets them drop their masks, exposes the lie, the spinelessness, the baseness, the sanctimoniousness; it shakes the suffocating inertia of a materialism, which attacks even the clearest assertion of the senses; and by placing collective groups of human beings face to face with their dark powers, their secret strength, it invites them to assume a brave and aloof attitude towards the fate which they would never have attained without theatre (qtd. Gunner 225).

6. CONCLUSION

In this play, Nwamuo does not only fully equip his characters for collective action that finally upstages the oppressive and repressive apparatuses of state dictatorship but has also created a utopian situation where the oppressed and dominated prisoners experience incredible transformation especially in the abrupt reversal of roles that appears a simplistic approach. This is explainable in the fact that the playwright is eager to eradicate every iota of gloom in the socio-political life of the people. It is also an assurance to his audience of the transience of human powers. Thus, he creates a situation where the characters are made to break the chains of fatalism and move, deciding their destiny through collective pedagogy and action, directed towards achieving a more just and peaceful society. Whatever the sacrifice taken it only justifies the fact that:

The theatre of revolt is not a tragic theatre, but it teaches us how to be tragic men; and if comfort and happiness are not often found there, strength and courage are (Brustein 417).

Again, one social malaise that the playwright questions in the play is the rationale for all wars, including the one that the prisoners absconded from. The play castigates bad leaders and bad leadership in Nigeria and the continent of Africa that are responsible for prosecuting wars of blame where the common people are drafted without their consent. The significance of the play is evergreen in a country like Nigeria where leadership is a burden rather a benefit to the people.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a more expansive work on this, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Praxis_intervention, Norbert Elias's "The Civilizing Process," Bourdieu and Wacquant's *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, and the essays in *The Field of Cultural Production* especially, Pierre Bourdieu's "The Field of Cultural Production Or the Economic World Reversed".

² Norbert Elias (288) also believes that this involves action aimed at bringing about material changes and which should flow from the reflexive self-monitoring, unsettled internality and the reverberation of the unsettled internalities could produce in the *figurational*.

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