Reflection of History and Struggle in Modern African Drama: A Reassessment of the Historical and Dramatic Characters in Emeka Nwabueze’s The Dragon’s Funeral

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Historical facts evidently have often time provided source materials for the modern African playwright in creating his story. The committed playwright combines the fact of history, blends it with artistic ingenuity and presents a dramatic experience of a people. This combination of facts of history with fiction could be referred to as “faction”. The facts of history may include struggle for emancipation, war, famine, outbreak of a disease, political instability, fashion, terrorism, natural disaster, colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, etc. It is in view of this that this paper surveys the struggle by Nigerian women during the colonial period for their emancipation out of the evils of colonialism and economic exploitation. The gallant Nigerian women of Aba in 1929, who vehemently challenged the British colonial administration of heavy tax imposition on Nigerians, have been represented in dramatic form by Emeka Nwabueze in his play The Dragon’s Funeral. This work has done a reassessment of the major characters in the play. The aim is to see how these dramatic characters in the play conform to the actual historical characters. For the purpose of dramaturgy, the playwright seems to have added some dramatic techniques; like the aesthetics of storytelling to provide a more vivid dramatic experience. The representation of historical characters in the play provides obvious evidences of the reflection of history and struggle in modern Africa drama and also emphasises the efficacy of modern African plays as viable tools for the documentation of history.

Keywords: dramaturgy, faction, reassessment, dramatic representation.

INTRODUCTION

Historical drama, literally, is a documentation of the past events in a society, in dramatic form. Historical drama often draws its thematic pre-occupation from people’s political, economic, cultural and ideological struggles as contained in their history. The focus of this study is to survey how history and struggle have reflected in modern African drama through a reassessment of the major characters in Nwabueze’s The Dragon’s Funeral. The play used as case study is an artistic documentation or reflection of history, with inherent action bordering on the struggle of the colonial Nigerian society for their emancipation from many years of living with pains, unjust indignations, dehumanisation and marginalisation they were daily, made to endure. The agitations in the play as led by the protagonist; Adaugo are rooted in the masses’ rejection of the oppressive government imposed on them by the British government to socio-political issues. Analytical reassessment of this brave women leader becomes pivotal as a historical document since it captures
dramatically the colonial women of Aba and their liberation struggle from the fangs of colonialism and economic exploitation.

The function of history in human society cannot be over emphasised. Clark defines history as “the record of anything that has ever happened in the past, however long ago or however recently” (1). Nwabueze has contributed in the preservation of the colonial history of Nigeria through an artistic and dramatic documentation of the Aba women’s riot of 1929; a fight by women against the heavy tax imposition on women by the British colonial administration. Oftentimes, historical playwrights acquaint themselves immensely with the facts of history of a place and specific period of their choice, standing apart from it, adjusting the evidence of history, and mixing it with the imagination of their minds. One peculiar quality of historical drama otherwise known as faction is that it’s themes, border on the people’s struggle and suffering, from past to present times. Yerima in his comment on historical drama and struggle cites Soyinka who describes the playwright as “one who takes the inhabitants of textual history in a short, bowdlerised trip into the realistic hinterland of the poet’s imagination.” (7). Again Yerima is of the opinion that

Most times, history as told by great historians evokes sympathy, especially colonial history, as one sees one domineering force bully the minor ones. But fate constantly intervenes and interrupts the lives of people history emerges from. For a playwright who wants to write drama from out of history, I am able through the material history provides, to subject myself to a process of self-criticism, while empowering even sometimes historical contradictions...

(6).

The dramatic characters in the play appear to be a representation of the actual characters that pioneered the making of the history (Aba Women’s Riot of 1929). Dramatic characters could therefore be a direct representation of the real/actual characters that perpetuated the actions as contained in colonial history of Nigeria. Aniago recognises the role of the creative artiste; the playwright in the documentation of history and also the fact that history provides source of material for the playwright and states that

Among all forms of drama material sources, history as a source material of a drama story, places the storyteller and the published story at an inevitable passionate scrutiny by different interest groups. Despite this, evidentially, playwrights have not shied away from reaching out to history to excavate their source materials for dramatic stories... creative writings are essentially generated differently from a creative combination of typologies of realities. (58)

This paper therefore focuses on reassessing and comparing the major characters in the play and the actual historical characters to see how the playwright has blended the facts of history and his artistic imagination and ingenuity in telling the story of the historical deeds of women in 1929. History is very important in every human society, even though Hagel is of the opinion that “... people and government never have learned anything from history, or acted on the principles deducted from it.” (29). The playwright obviously is not a historian, but someone who is knowledgeable in history and thus creates his art from, “the way a nation goes, whether that of the mind or that of the spirit” (Hamilton 35) Reaffirming this, Enekwe observes that “society and history determines the shape drama takes at any time and place” (27) The modern African playwright evidently uses the evidence of history as raw materials for the creation of plays.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of coherent, logical presentation and a vivid corroboration of the dramatic characters in the play and the actual historical characters, this paper adopts sequential framework based on Van Gennep’s (1960) Rite of Passage marked by three stages; the pre-liminal, the liminal and the post-liminal stages. This will therefore segment this discourse into the pre-riot, riot and post-riot stages. This has present historical fact side by side with the dramatic reconstruction or presentation of historical facts as reflected in Nwabueze’s The Dragon’s Funeral. This way, an evaluation and analysis of how the playwright presents the facts of history in the play under study has been explained using this framework.

The Pre-liminal stage: The Colonial Social Structure in Southern Nigeria and its Reflection in The Dragon’s Funeral by Emeka Nwabueze

The social structure of the colonial administration in southern Nigeria was created in a pattern that the natives had so many grouse about the administration. One of the major reasons for colonialization arguably is for economic benefits. The British colonial government due to their economic agenda introduced in Nigeria both direct and indirect rule as systems of governance so as to cut down the cost of governance and also get the traditional rulers involved in the economic exploitation of their own people. The policy of indirect rule worked well in the Northern and Western parts of Nigeria and was very beneficial to the colonial administration because few officials ruled indirectly through traditional African institutions and leaders thus saving money they would have spent on more officials. This system was a total failure in the Southern Nigeria because of the social structure of the society. Talbot referred to the colonial Southern people as “Population composed of people living in independent unconsolidated and usually small groups subject to no central government” (562)

Furthermore, Umoren states that “The women participate in this democracy through their patrilineage, village and religo-cultural organisation. They met regularly for the protection and development of women affairs. Through these organisations women made their collective needs known to the village councils.” (62). It will be recalled that in 1906, the Native Court Ordinance paved way for the appointment and institutionalisation of Warrant Chiefs. These chiefs often times were selected from the existing chiefs. Umoren also recaps that “these warrant chiefs were given assignments which includes overseeing and executing of orders of the District Officer (DO), collection of forced taxation and facilitation of colonial trade in the hinterland”(63). The activities of these warrant chiefs and their associates; the court messengers and clerks could be regarded as the immediate course of the Aba women’s riot. No wonder N.U. Akpan an administrative officer in colonial Nigeria linked the Aba women’s riot of 1929 to the activities of the Warrant Chiefs.

As in all cases where power and authority were suddenly thrust into the hand of those who... are not qualified or good enough to exercise them, these chiefs straight away abused their positions. One result of such extensive abuse of power on the part of these warrant chiefs was Women’s Riot of 1929 in Eastern Nigeria (35)

The immediate cause of the women’s riot/revolt of 1929 was triggered by the scuffle between Nwanyeruwa; a widow of OlokoOjim and Mark Emereuwa, who was directed by one powerful warrant chief Okugo to help take census of the people as directed by the
District Officer. Census was associated with taxation, because, as the colonial administration had taken a similar census in 1926 without revealing the fact that it would be used in imposing tax on men in 1928. The rumour disseminated so fast and fuelled the fears of women claiming that both men and their wives would be taxed after the next census. Hence, before the head count began, women had decided in their meetings to wait and see who would tax them during the hyperinflation of the 1920s when family incomes were declining rapidly (Oriji 90-97). Oriji further authenticates his claims that the women’s riot was caused by the incompetence of some officials and thus cites the incidence between on Mr Mark Emeruwa; a messenger of one of the Warrant Chiefs and AdaugoNwanyereuwa; a women leader thus

Emeruwa never expected that task he was asked to perform would trigger a massive revolt of Igbo women when on that fateful day, November 18, 1929, he went to late Ojim's compound, his first place of call, and asked his widow, Nwanyereuwa, to "count her goats, sheep and people." In anger, the woman retorted, "was your [late] mother counted?" In other words, why do you want me to pay tax? Don't you know that women don't pay tax in traditional Igbo society? The violent encounter and verbal exchanges between the two, infuriated Nwanyereuwa who then rushed to the town square to report the incident to women who were incidentally holding a meeting that day to discuss how they would respond to the "tax problem." (94)

In the play, the playwright in his approach of presenting the facts of history in a dramatic form adopts the Brechtian technique of storytelling. Ekwedike the storyteller then introduces the reader or the audience to the world of the characters. It is important to note that many of the dramatic names used by the playwright are the actual or real names of those who took part in the making of this history. In the play, when the news of census and tax imposition on women filtered into the community the women leader, AdaugoNwanyereuwa; the widow of Ojim quickly summoned the women to a meeting at the market square. This is evident in the following lines from the play by Adaugo “We have heard that there will be new policy where women would be taxed by dreadful monster called government... my sisters we shall not allow ourselves to be taxed” (Nwabueze 18-19). This is one of the major social structures of the then Southern society where women met to discuss their welfare. The playwright gave the original name of the women leader; AdaugoNwanyereuwa who championed this fight to the dramatic character in his play thus making this a relevant source of history for generations to come. Also, the fear of women that the census was made to impose tax on them is also expressed in the play the same way it is contained in the history. Nwabueze further depicts or records in a dramatic form the event that took Mark Emereuwa to conduct census as directed by chief Okeugo in accordance and obedience to the instruction of the district officer and the aggression and resistance Emereuwa met at the house of widow of Ojim, Nwanyereuwa. This very incident was what spurred the women of the entire region into the protest and revolt against the British colonial administration. The account as dramatically recorded by Nwabueze conforms to the history historical evidence Oriji and other scholars have documented in the annals and chronicles of history. Umoren also reports this historical incidence thus:

On November 23, 1929, at Oloko, Owerri Province, pressured by the colonial government Chief Okeugo, one of the warrant chiefs, asked one Mark Omeruwa, to start the census. The latter began counting in one
household, where one of the wives named Nwayeruwa confronted the enumerator, asking him if his mother has been counted as his birth. A scuffle ensued and Nwayeruwa was injured, she ran to the women who were coincidentally having a meeting at the market square and announced the bad news. This spurred the women into immediate revolution. (64-65)

The play in its entirety is also set in the actual location where the incident happened. This very incidence has been reported by many historians as the catalyst that spurred the women of Aba in action. This incidence ruptured the bottle emotions and grievances of these women hence the agitation.

The Liminal Stage: Protest against Colonial Economic Policy in Southern Nigeria and its Representation in Nwabueze’s The Dragon’s Funeral

Consequent upon the argument that ensued in the house of Ojim between his widow, Nwanyeruwa and Mark Emereuwa comes the dawn of the historic deeds of the women of Southern Colonial Nigeria. Oriji opines that

Oloko women, after hearing Nwanyeruwa's account, went into action, believing that women would be taxed. They sent leaves of palm-oil tree (a symbol of invitation) to women in other parts of Bende District, nearby Umuahia and Ngwa areas and other places, and within a few days, about 10,000 women were said to have assembled in Oloko, "sitting" on Warrant Chief Okugo, and demanding his trial and resignation. (94)

In the play; The Dragon’s Funeral, Adaugo Nwanyeruwa leads the women’s protest and revolt through the street, singing and dancing, marched to the office of the District Officer demanding the insignia of office of the Warrant Chief, the embattled dragon Okeugo asking for his removal. The District Officer; John Cook who became overwhelmingly afraid of these women through his aid Nduka granted them their request by handing over Okeugo’s red cap to them to conduct his funeral. This very dramatic action as presented by Nwabueze in the play under study to a large extent conforms to historical action of Women of Aba during the agitation in 1929. The petitions and requests the women made to the district officer during the women revolt of 1929 is the same the women characters in the play demanded from the District Officer. The women demanded that no such economic policy of heavy tax imposition on women will be carried out and also the removal of the Warrants Chiefs who use the office as a platform for economic exploitation of the masses. It could therefore be right to state that these situations that the women protested against in the historic women riot apparently conform to the unfolding actions in Nwabueze’s The Dragon’s Funeral. It is also important to note that the playwright in his dramatic documentation of the events of Aba Women’s Riot of 1929 gave the dramatic characters that represented the district officers the actual name of the then colonial District Officer – John Cook. The character Captain John Cook is the name of the district office resident in the Oloko/Ngwa region and its environs at the time this incidence occurred. This name was also used by Nwabueze in the artistic construction and documentation of the history in the play under study. Gloria Chuku records that

In late September 1929, Captain John Cook, the Acting District Officer of Bende, summoned the warrant chiefs in his district and instructed them to collect more information from every household and that it was not for taxing women. While some of the warrant chiefs carried out the order as instructed, others openly informed
their people that the new census was to start the taxation of women. (9)

In the play Nwabueze introduces a scene where a character named Captain John Cook, a British District Officer (DO) summoned the warrant chiefs and handed to them an explicit order instructing them to conduct a detailed census both on the women and the men. This very scene in the drama therefore is an artistic depiction of history on the role and activities of the British officers in popular Aba women riot that caused death of many women. Virtually all the characters reflected in the play greatly represent the deeds of the real people involved in this historical event of Aba women’s riot. It is also important to include that the Aba women riot of 1929 was pre-dominantly characterised with songs at every stage of the protest. At first it was songs of defiance and after their demands was supposedly met it was songs of victory. Umoren records that when the colonial administration yielded to the demands of these women by punishing Chief Okeugo. The women celebrated this feet through their songs of victory; “filling the air with victory songs, the women danced as many more joined them.” (66). A reflection of this approach of freedom fighting through songs is represented in the play; The Dragon’s Funeral. The women start their agitation through songs. In movement ten in the play text the playwright presents in front of the District Officer’s lodge, crowd of women carrying fresh cassava leaves and are chanting war songs demanding audience with the District Officer. They were finally attended to by the colonial administration. The outcome of this protest is the granting of most of their demands. What follows next is the victory songs which heralds their exist and end of the play.

The Post-liminal Stage: The Result of the Aba Women’s Riot and its Representation in The Dragon’s Funeral by Emeka Nwabueze

The Aba Women’s Riot brought about many positive results in the colonial society and could also be argued to have accelerated the speed of attainment of Nigerian independence. Umoren states that after the “taxation on women were cancelled. Prices of imported goods were brought down and those exported raised. With indirect rule recognised, the warrant chief system was cancelled and replaced with system of Native Authorities... the women also requested that the warrant chiefs be prosecuted and was also granted to the delight of these women.”(69). This raised a consciousness and also gave more impetus to the fight for the liberation of the entity called Nigeria from the fangs of colonialism. It can be recalled that on the 6th of December, 1929, over two thousand women conveyed near the DO office for a pre-arranged meeting. Prominent amongst them are the six women leaders representing the six groups from Adoni, Kwa (Ibibib), Nkoro (Igbo) Opopo and Ogoni town. They met with the District Officer and made their request which include: cancellation of tax imposed on women and even men, cancellation of the head count and others. These women also requested that these demands should be written down and duplicated into six copies as a proof for the acceptance of their demand (Umoren 66). This event as contained in history also conforms to the dramatic action contained in The Dragon’s Funeral thus the reflection of history in modern African drama

Nwabueze did not fail to depict and record artistically the achievement of these brave and noble women from Eastern part of Nigeria who fought for their right and achieved it. Their demands were also made explicit in the play, The Dragon’s Funeral. In the play, the protagonist, Adaugo makes the following demands thus

We are simple people but we are not simpletons. Our course is not yet fulfilled. We know the difference between victory and success. Go
back and tell 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 that women should be consulted before any decision affecting them is concluded. Let him write it down so we can preserve it an agreement between the government and us. (76-77)

The playwright records that the District Officer immediately ascended his signature to the request of these women therefore lifting the heavy tax imposition and granting other demands made by these women. The cancellation of heavy taxation imposition on these women means that business will thrive better and profit increased. This sense of relieve is reflected in the victory songs of the women in the play. Chief Okeugo who was over zealous and selfish in his discharge of duty as warrant chief was arraigned before a court, prosecuted and sentenced. The following lines show the judgement given on this matter.

Okeugo, this court considers your offence an act of sedition designed to embarrass the British Administration...Your unrepentant demonstration of regal pride, the drastic effect of the uprising and the unfortunate consequences of the incident make your guilt as clear as a piece of China weeping in her tropical sun.... The court takes into consideration the fact that your notorious accomplice Mr. Mark Emeruwa has already been sentenced by another court. You are sentenced to five years imprisonment with hard labour. (14-15)

The women as represented in the play achieved both victory and success. The tax imposed on them was cancelled and the warrant chief Okeugo who constituted himself into a semi-god, parades himself with so much pride and thus uses his position to inflict pains on his own people for selfish reason is punished by the same British Administration he represents and works for. Even the Judge in delivering judgement acknowledges the fact that Chief Okeugo has really worked hard for the administration. This is captured in the following lines by the character Judge. “When one considers your service to the Crown, your sense of duty, and the degree of suffering to which you have been so callously subjected, one feels pity for you.”(14)

CONCLUSION

This paper is a comparative analysis of the reflection of history and struggle in modern African drama. Drama does not exist in a vacuum. The historical deeds of women Aba during the colonial administration serves as a raw material for the playwright. The facts of history are woven into side by side with the events that happened in the play, The Dragon’s Funeral. The aim is to decipher how the playwright blended the facts of history and his artistic ingenuity in the documentation of the heroic deeds of women during the Aba Women’s Riot of 1929. It appears that the playwright did not distort the facts of history; rather, the facts of history are presented in a dramatic form. A reassessment of the major characters in the play provides evidences that the names the playwright gives to the characters are the actual names of the historic characters who took part in the making of the history. Also, the events that took place in the play when compared to the actual historical event are in conformity. The playwright followed the historical antecedents of the actual events in presenting his dramatic action. Drama therefore, could be referred to as a veritable tool for the preservation and documentation of the people’s history and culture. The Dragon’s Funeral by EmekaNwabueze is an artistic presentation and documentation of the events that
happened during Aba Women’s riot in agitation against the dehumanisation by the British imperialist and colonial administration.

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