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IMPUNITY AS THE BANE OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA SOCIAL-POLITICAL  
DEVELOPMENT: AN EXAMINATION OF NIYI OSUNDARE'S  
*THE STATE VISIT*

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ABSTRACT

The traditional role of an African writer is that he is the conscience of his society. He should serve as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and the voice of vision in his own time. Niyi Osundare has demonstrated his awareness of these in his play *The State Visit*. He x-rays how the leadership of Yakeland rules the state with impunity sacking his ministers and aides; diverting resources meant for the development of agriculture and ignoring the vulnerable in the society. The paper, apart from dilating on all these, shall look at the messages the playwright tries to put across to Nigerians particularly the need for the masses to be aware of their situation and the need for resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

Most Nigerian writers were cultural nationalists in the years before independence, and in their words tried to explain the tradition of their people to a largely hostile world. Among the literary artists of that period, Achebe can be singled out for his imaginative recreation of Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964). But during the post-colonial era, "the post-independence mood of disillusionment" is also reflected in our literature. During this period, Nigerian literature was forced to move from cultural affirmation to social criticism as our writers could no longer neglect contemporary social and political problems (Ker, 2004). Soyinka was among the first set of Nigerian writers to admonish and warn his society in his plays *The Road* (1965) and *Kongi's Harvest* (1965). Achebe also did the same in his novel of social criticism, *A Man of the People*, in which a military coup put an end to a particularly corrupt political regime. This military adventure into the political scene in Nigeria gave rise to a new vision on the part of our literary artists, particularly Nigerian playwrights. Dasyuva (2004) asserts that the incursion of the military into Nigeria's political life barely five years after her independence led to a new brand of neo-colonialism, and shortly after that, the thirty months civil war (1967-1970). This led to the emergence of a new set of Nigerian playwrights in response to the nation's strange development. They were more forthcoming in their persistent criticism of the military dictatorship than their predecessors. For example, Bode Sowande's *Afamoko – The Workhorse* (1978) and

Flamingo (1982), Tess Onwume's *The Reign of Wazobia*, Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977), Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* and a host of others. In essence, modern Nigerian drama is largely informed by sociological factors.

Our concern in this piece is an examination of Niyi Osundare's *The State Visit*, a play written to consciously raise the level of awareness of Nigerians to the impunity of the governing class with the sole aim of making them reject and resist post-colonial disillusionment and general oppression. Before we go into an analysis of the play *The State Visit*, we would like to briefly say who Niyi Osundare is.

#### **Niyi Osundare: A Biographical Sketch**

Niyi Osundare is a leading African writer who has been given a lot of recognition internationally. He was born in 1937 in Ikere-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria (Okunoye, 2010).

A prolific poet, dramatist and literary critic, he was educated at the University of Ibadan, the University of Leeds and York University where he bagged his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D degrees respectively. He has always been a vehement champion of the right to free speech and his works are profoundly concerned with the plight of the common people. In particular satire is his favorite mode for exploring the relationship between the ruler and the ruled in Africa (Okunoye, 2010). His works have won both the Association of Nigerian Authors' Poetry Prize and the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. He is a celebrated performer of his poetry, which has affinities with Nigeria's oral traditions.

#### ***The State Visit*: A Synopsis**

The play tells the story of Yakeland, an imaginary African country where the country's wealth is in the hands of a few corrupt rulers in cohort with the American military. The play is written in the style of street theatre and produces a biting and dramatic satire on political authoritarianism and ignorance which the author holds responsible for the backwardness of many African countries. The play does however show that such oppression is being challenged, and that there exists a natural inclination towards resistance and solidarity for which Osundare's characters demonstrate great capacity.

The play opens with the preparation for a state visit by a ruler of a neighbouring state, Wilama. The narrator gives an extensive discussion of the rot and madness that characterize the government machinery in Yakeland. The cabinet meets with the Head (the ruler of Yakeland) as chairman. The main purpose of the meeting is the discussion of the impending state visit of the head of Wilama. The cabinet members are a sycophantic lot. With the exception of the Minister of Finance, all of the others simply consent to the proposal of the Head. The only agenda of the meeting is how to raise the fund needed to welcome the visiting President of Wilama. In the end, the Minister of Finance is directed to divert a special fund. Against the sane counsel of the Finance Minister, the six hundred million Naira meant for the maize project to ameliorate the effect of the drought Yakeland is experiencing is diverted to planning *The State Visit*. This idea of diverting money meant for the maize project exposes the inept and visionless leadership of Yakeland who deliberates on how to accord a visiting head of state an ostentatious welcome when their country is experiencing a drought. The decision shows that the cabinet lacks direction. The insensitivity of the leadership of Yakeland to the plight of their people is similar to what leaders in most African states do today.

The minister of Finance who is the only sane voice against the diversion of the fund meant for the maize project is sacked and replaced before the next meeting for being uncooperative. To further show the plight of the masses, workers and students stage a protest to indicate their opposition to the unfortunate preparation for *The State Visit* but the state employs force to disorganize the rally.

The media is also not left out of the preparation. The Daily Gist is paid to provide adequate coverage for the visit in anticipation of possible opposition to the visit by The Telling Tempo. Every possible precaution is taken to ensure a successful visit by the Head of State of Wilama.

#### **Critical comments**

Osundare's *The State Visit* is a biting satire of the vices of African leaders, military dictators and even rulers in democratic African nations. Yakeland as presented in the play could be regarded as referring to Nigeria and many other African nations where visionless leadership, corruption, greed, inefficiency, suppression of opposition and dissent are the order of the day. Okunoye (2010) says that the play is a satire

which is unsparing in the manner that it condemns contemporary African leaders. Though the play is written during the military era in Nigeria, all the vices and inadequacies of the Head of Yakeland is not different from the activities of contemporary democracies in Africa and particularly in Nigeria.

Most African leaders do a lot of wrong showing their incompetence and when criticized exhibit a degree of intolerance for opposition. As the Head of Yakeland is intolerant of the Finance Minister's opposition to the diversion of money meant for the maize project so we have seen some contemporary African leaders do. Ministers and other government functionaries are sacked at will and governors impeached once they are not in support of the leadership.

Corruption among other vices has been shown to contribute to the failure of the leadership in Yakeland. It is also what Osundare (2014) refers to as Nigeria's fastest growing industry. He goes further to say that corruption is one hell of a demon which virtually everyone in Nigeria talks so about but which only few are ready to confront head-on. This is because corruption is the very lifeblood of Nigeria's politics and economy. As it is run in this country, the so-called presidential system does not only feed on corruption, it actively encourages it as demonstrated by the huge deposits expected from office seekers, the large sums of money that exchange hands among party stakeholders, the perverse tradition of patronage through booty-sharing, the shocking combination of immunity and impunity by public functionaries and the absolute lack of transparency and accountability.

#### **Conclusion**

Osundare's *The State Visit* was inspired by military dictatorship due to the Nigerian experience. But a careful look at contemporary African leadership when compared with military dictatorship will show a gloomier picture. African leaders who claim to be democrats exhibit worse attitudes to the ruled more than military dictators. Similar to what happens in *The State Visit*, African leadership particularly in Nigeria must change their attitude to the ruled via the rule of law. They must not rule their nations with impunity borne out of their immunity.

In line with Osundare's call for resistance to bad leadership in *The State Visit*, he says in his in a public lecture titled "WHY WE NO LONGER BLUSH: CORRUPT... (2014:9)

.... Too often we encourage the criminality of our rulers by kow-towing to their every whim and caprice, we invite their disdain by denying ourselves any claim to self-respect, we court their oppression by readily offering them our backs to ride upon the cow when we should kick, we temporize when we need to toughen up. It is the typical Nigerian attitude to power that has turned our rulers into 'aseyawu' the one who does as she/he please(s), and encouraged them to corrupt the immunity innocently enshrined in the constitution into the impunity of criminal rulership.

The above quotation throws more light on the necessity of resistance to the impunity demonstrated by the Head of Yakeland in *The State Visit* as shown by his visionless, intolerant and corrupt leadership. Osundare finally asserts that our fate as Africans is in our own hands.

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