

Multi-Culturalism in Abdullahi Abubakar's *A New Weft in the Loom, Citizens or Strangers and Corper'tion*

FOLUKE ALIYU-IBRAHIM
& SARAT A. SALIHU

Abstract

Multi-Culturalism is the commonest cause for the various conflicts in different parts of the world. Africa has witnessed, and is still witnessing, its own share of these ethnic uprisings. Nigeria, with its diverse ethnic groups and subsequent ethnic-based upheavals over the years, stands as a sad example in the continent. Being products of their societies, Nigerian literary artists have been influenced by issues concerning multi-culturalism which they put to different purposes in their various works. In this paper, using the descriptive method, we investigate the recourse to ethnicity in Abdullahi Abubakar's drama texts *A New Weft in the Loom, Citizen or Strangers and Corper'tion*. The analysis revealed that Abubakar's foray into multi-culturalism is an aesthetic to mediatise and provide workable solutions to the conflicts in the play texts. The conclusion in the paper is that rather than being tools of division, pride in an individual or group's ethnicity is a common and natural element of life and therefore multi-culturalism can be used for mutual understanding of the differences between separate societies and consequently for national development.

Introduction

No individual is an island unto himself as he must belong to other groups: by blood, by shared interest, shared language, and other practices. Each group has its unique perception of life, environment, nature and other aspects of the society in a bid to live in harmony with members of the same group, other similar or dissimilar groups and nature. Such a group has been classified as ethnic group. Each society is made up several ethnic groups, thus, each is multi-cultural. Ethnicity, from general point of view, is associated with a group of people who are tied by certain distinguishing characteristics which range from language, culture

to similar traditional practices, and not necessarily by blood. Therefore every individual belongs to one ethnic group or the other. Sometimes, in a multicultural society, these ethnic affiliations may give rise to ethnic biases and prejudices which sometimes lead to loss of lives and property, divisions and wars.

Globally, there are cases of ethnic biases in different multi-cultural settings of the world. Examples include Yugoslavia which has split into Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Croatia and Macedonia; Korea into South and North Korea; while India was divided to create Pakistan. All of these occurred as a result of ethnic intolerance and prejudice. The ongoing unrests in Syria and Palestine are also examples of ethnic upheavals. In Africa, these ethnic biases have given rise to strife and conflicts as can be seen in Sudan and Rwanda among others.

Nigeria, with over 350 ethnic groups, exemplifies an African nation whose multi-cultural nature has resulted into unrests and ethnic strife crippling peace, social order, unity and development. These have manifested over the years as intra-tribal disputes, inter-tribal conflicts and civil war. These ethnic upheavals are major causes of underdevelopment in Nigeria (Khalid and Afegbua 2014).

One of the major reasons for these conflicts, according to Simon Rakov, is the need by many of the ethnic groups in Nigeria to retain their ethnic identity (postcolonialweb.org). It should be noted that being conscious of one's origin or ethnicity on its own is not a harmful thing. It is one of the various identities of the individual or group and it also gives the individual a sense of belonging in a multi-cultural setting. These are crucial not only for the individual's mental wellbeing but also for social cohesiveness at all levels, beginning from the family level. However, it is the abuse of such a consciousness for selfish interests that pose a problem (Odinukaeze 2014). Not only the followership, but the political elite are implicated in this abuse (Obafemi 4).

The societal implications of multi-culturalism enable us to adopt the sociological literary theory for the critical evaluation of the perception and social imperative of multi-culturalism in Abubakar's three plays: *A New Weft in the Loom*, *Citizens or Strangers* and *Corper'tion*. The sociological literary theory accommodates a human centered analysis and approach to literary study. It is an encompassing theoretical model as it investigates and explores the intricacies of gender, culture, class structure, race, inequalities, ethnicity, etc as reflected in literary works in relation to the context of literary production. In other words, based on the premise

that sociology is the study of the human society, the sociological literary theory aids in the adequate comprehension of social structures which range from general world view, economic and political situations and societal norms by exploring the „reciprocal relationship“ between literature and the society, (Ganga 15).

Ethnic Conflicts and the Literary Imagination

One of the functions of literature is to serve as an instrument of societal propagation, change and development (Obafemi 77). With the challenges confronting man, especially the African, it becomes the duty of a functionally committed African writer to criticise and question societal mores, attitudes and beliefs and to propagate the aspirations of the people (Breytenbach 166). Multiculturalism, ethnic affiliations and biases have been major resources for African writers over the years from pre-colonial, through colonial, to post-colonial, times. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe alludes to the internal strife between the nine villages of Umuofia while in *Great Ponds*, Amadi presents two different communities: Chiolu and Aliakonu, which are in dispute over the ownership of a fishing pond. Osofisan's *Women of Owu* is a microcosm of the internecine conflicts that engulfed Yoruba land in the 19th century.

The philosophy of Negritude basically propagated ethnic diversity. Similarly, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa was built on the idea that no one ethnic affiliation, which was represented by skin colour, is inferior or superior to another. Thus underlying the anticolonial and anti-apartheid struggles in African literature were the call for the recognition of the diversities in ethnicity, the freedom to belong to, and express, ethnic affiliations and a protection from all forms of ethnic biases in multi-cultural societies.

Post-colonial African literary scene with particular reference to the Nigerian context has witnessed issues bordering on multi-culturalism and ethnic affiliation, its abuse and the consequences. There have also been historical representations of the Nigerian Civil War, the immediate cause of which was a secession by an ethnic group in the Nigerian polity. This has been captured by novels such as *The Last Duty* by Isidore Okpewho, *Heroes* by Festus Iyayi, *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Adichie and *There was a Country* by Chinua Achebe. Playwrights like Olu Obafemi have attempted to mediate in the longstanding feud between the Okun and Nupe people of Kogi state in plays such as

Ogidi Mandate and *Nights of a Mystical Beast*. Elnathan John's recent novel *Born on a Tuesday* alludes to the misconceptions that arise from generalisations and assumptions of other people's ethnic affiliations. Abdullahi Salih Abubakar is a Nigerian playwright who also discusses issues that deal with ethnicity. In this paper, we discuss Abubakar's perception of multi-culturalism and how he uses ethnic diversity to mediate in its abuse in three of his works namely: *A New Weft in the Loom*, *Citizens or Strangers* and *Corper'tion*.

Multi-Culturalism as a Tool of Oppression in *A New Weft in the Loom* Issues of multi-culturalism are embedded in the political world of *A New Weft in the Loom*. The first scene sets the basis for the employment of the abuse and use of ethnic diversity as a tool of oppression and as a solution. As represented in the lives of Dany and Dende, there is hunger in the land because of bad leadership and bad followership. Abubakar is at pains to show that this hunger is as a result of economic underdevelopment brought about by bad leadership and a complicit, and at best complacent followership (34-5). Dany informs Dende of his success at inviting the party's candidates to "come talk about their plans for we poor people" (7). It is at this debate that the playwright shows how the politicians abuse various ethnic groupings in the nation for their selfish ends. It is instructive that the four politicians are given names that are representative of four of Nigeria's ethnic groups: Azubuike from the South-East; Oworonsoki from the South-West; Osadebe from the South-South; and Barmini from the North. The politicians are inept and bereft of developmental ideas. Rather than present a manifesto that details a route to development, the politicians preach the „right to rule“ philosophy which is based on the wrong notion of ethnic superiority and thus heat up the polity along ethnic affiliations and thereby threatening peace and unity (8-10).

Action is temporarily halted in the major play for two other plays within the major plot. This halt is brought about by the Earth Priestess who narrates a fable. In Part 2 of the play, four older leaders (Lebawa, Obawo, Sadau and Kiz) who come in with Earth Priestess are revealed to the integral and theatre audiences. From their dialogue with the first four politicians, Oworonsoki, Barmini, Osadebe and Azubuike, they are shown to be figures from Nigerian history (specifically of its First Republic) who are considered heroes. They are Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Sir Ahmadu

Bello, and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. It is through their interactions that Abubakar reveals that Oworonsoki, Barmini, Osadebe and Azubuike have actually used power to perpetrate injustice on their people whether these were people of different ethnic groups or people from their own ethnic groups. Thus, they abused the multi-cultural nature of the nation to get power which was used to service selfish interests (31-3). Indeed, the politicians manipulate the ethnic consciousness of the people for negative ends. Interestingly, these divisions along ethnic affiliations are only seen among the followers as indicated in Sadau's accusation as Barmini's reply indicates that the politicians are united (34). Multi-Culturalism as a Tool of Liberation in A New Weft in the Loom

The solution to the conflict in the play is presented in the play-within-a-play. In actual fact, there are two plays inserted into the major play. Here, Abuabkar portrays how ethnic diversity can be used as a tool for liberation from the socio-political and economic woes the people have immersed themselves in. In the world of the play, these inserts are actually a fable told by Earth Priestess. In the first insert, Lale rushes in to a Seer, and worriedly informs him of a nightmare involving her only child, Ogele. In this dream, she sees Ogele turn into a river and pass through three regions which are obviously representing the three major regions of the country – the north, west and south. This is gleaned from the fact of the names and culture of the people of the three regions portrayed in the text. Ogele may thus be symbolic of the River Niger that runs through the nation. The three regions are plagued by socio-economic and political challenges symbolically represented as natural and man-made disasters. In the North, there is famine caused by lack of rains and by the exploitation of the people by their leaders in collusion with foreign (developed) nations. In the West, the people experience internecine wars caused by the selfish interests of two of their leaders – Oluode Oke-odo and Oluode Isale-Odo. The people in the South are challenged by flood and erosion which has caused environmental pollution. These scenes portray the wide-ranging problems including their sources that are confronting the people. These problems are social, economic and political; they are natural and man-made; and they are internal and external.

In each of these regions, messages are received from the supernatural world through a marabout (North), a god - Esu (West) and a river goddess – Edho Ame (South). The messages demand that each leader in each region sacrifice someone (a maiden) that is dear to him to embark on an expedition in search of a

union with strangers from another land; only then could the various regions be cleansed of the evils bedeviling the people. This is done after some initial hesitation on the parts of each leader. What Abubakar seems to be saying here is that each group must be ready to sacrifice its feelings of ethnic superiority for the survival, not only of the group, but also of the nation.

The various leaders of three expeditions meet and come together to form two groups after which the maidens are handed over to the winning group in marital rites binding them together. As the three ethnic groups meet, diffuse and fuse into two groups, constant references to unity are emphasized:

Ogele: And except we have common front, our diversity will turn to a disadvantage instead of an asset (25)

Group Leader B: Everyone should see the assignment before us as a call to national duty (27).

Thus, as far as the playwright is concerned, the solution to the socio-economic and political challenges confronting the people lies in, or begins with, a unification of the various ethnic groups that make up the country. However, it is in the action and consequently costume, rather than dialogue, that we see multiculturalism being used as tool for the liberation of the people (25-6). The playwright even attempts to take this unification beyond the stage in his attempt to unify both the integral and the integrated (theatre). The decision of who becomes the winner is left to both audiences to make thus:

People who are impressed rise to applaud him. This should cut across all the audience. Ogele clears his throat and asks the integral and integrated audience to give their verdicts. Reasonable views should be sampled and the prevailing one should be announced by the committee (29).

This unity of the two audiences is implied earlier in the play when the playwright instructs that reactions of doubt and outright belief should come from the integrated audience when Earth Priestess addresses the integrated (theatre) audience. Also she speaks directly to the theatre audience and asks for those interested in acting in her fable. Furthermore, at the end of the fable, as Mother Earth delivers her speech, we are told she is “pointing to the integral and the integrated audience”.

This point is instructive because Abubakar’s theatre is modeled after those of the emergent school or the Nigerian Marxist mode, represented by playwrights such

as Femi Osofisan and Olu Obafemi. This theatre is a fusion of the Brechtian and Theatre of the round where actors sit amongst audiences who have paid, or have been invited to watch (i.e. the real audience), the plays. One of the features of this theatre is the seeming involvement of the real audience in the action on stage. What Abubakar does therefore, in *A New Weft in the Loom*, is an attempt at a physical representation of his message of unification of the diverse ethnic groups to which the actors and his real audience could be affiliated.

Another technique relevant to this discussion of ethnic diversity in the play is the play- within-a-play which occurs twice in the course of the text. We interpret this complex plot structure on several levels. First, it could mean a symbolic representation of the multi-cultural nature of the country. On another level, it could be a symbolic representation of the rootedness of ethnic consciousness in the psyche of the people. Third, and no less important, it could be read as a symbolic representation of the complexities that ensue from the abuse of multiculturalism in any such polity.

Multi-Culturalism as a Tool of Oppression in Citizens or Strangers

The play opens with a tensed atmosphere portrayed in the war songs of the two ethnic groups – the Idoma and the Fulani who are neighbours. The speed with which both groups choose and prepare for war is indicative of deep mistrust on both sides. The two groups have always lived together in peace, even though they do also have incidents of rancour. However these have always been resolved amicably, though, in recent times, these minor skirmishes have degenerated to mass killings (43).

As the play progresses, we realise that ethnic conflict is just one of other problems confronting the two communities. The scenes involving Ehohi and her mother indicate an abdication of duties by a mother who because of the stupendous wealth available to her, has not brought up her daughter to be respectful and responsible. Hence, Officer concludes: “What else can one expect from a stupid mother and a spoilt daughter?” (9). This is aptly captured by the narrators in a song (10). The subsequent dialogue between Narrator I and Narrator II shed more light on this social evil.

Corruption is another evil captured in the play (11). Also in the play is government inaction and insensitivity to the needs of the people. This is portrayed in the flood which occurs when one of the rivers in the country overflows its

banks and sweeps away the bridge that links two parts of the country (15). Yet another social ill revealed in the play-text is unemployment and nepotism. Durow is a graduate who is forced to take the job of a cab driver because, as he puts it: "It is better than fraud, armed robbery, political hooliganism and so on, which many youths pick as option these days" (23). Durow adds that he has to pay some people in order to be called for job interviews which he, eventually, never gets. The scene where the Secretary of Moving Transport is arrested on the order of Ajuma, Ehohi's mother, opens with a song on the atrocity of the acceptance of bribes committed by the police (7). This is actualised in the treatment of Secretary by the police. Thus, the society is presented as one where nothing works; it is a society that is not at peace for many other reasons, and not only because of the hatred between the two communities.

Thus, the conflict is no longer merely the one between the Idoma and the Fulani. There seems to be a bigger one that has polarised the society into the privileged and the not privileged. While the common people are made to bear the brunt of these evils, the leadership class represented by Ehohi, her mother Ajuma and father Ediga who are of the Idoma ethnic group, seem to be immune from the economic and political ills of the society. Compared to the people, the problems facing the leadership class in the play text are superficial and personal indeed. Ajuma supposes wrongly that her daughter has been kidnapped and her husband has an illness that has defied all treatment. Ironically, it is in Ajuma's search for the solution to her problem that the cause and solution to the societal ills are revealed. The herbalist, Ogweba, reveals that for Ediga, Ajuma's husband, to get well, he (Ediga) must reveal the "connection between his wealth and the cattle" (34).

From Ediga's confession, it is revealed that he is responsible, not only for the calamity that befalls Durow and his family who are Fulani, but also for the mistrust and consequent mass killings between the Idoma and the Fulani. Ediga uses his power as Commissioner for Agriculture to usurp the land meant for the two communities' use and to kill every member of Durow's family, making it look as if it was done by some farmers. Ediga realizes that this is a weapon that can be used to the advantage of his political aspirations and therefore, with the aid of the media, fuels it. He then fuels the fracas to help his political ambition (53).

The media's role as an accomplice in the evil is further emphasised when Ediga repeats thus: "We cooked stories up afterwards and the media served

them...depending on the agreed prices” (54). The cause of these problems is, however, not one sided, that is, it is not only from the Idoma side. Just as we see in *A New Weft in the Loom*, both ethnic groups are presented as being responsible. Ediga confesses that: “I did it with the aid of an insider from your (the Fulani) side, Laagi” (51). It is an accusation which is confirmed by Laagi (54).

Multi-Culturalism as a Tool of Liberation in *Citizens or Strangers*

Durow suggests a permanent solution whereby some areas are earmarked as grazing land for a couple of years to enable them recuperate from extensive years of farming while the animals’ wastes serve as manure. Thereafter, that land would be exchanged for farmland. The cycle is to be repeated. It must be noted that this suggestion was proffered by Nigerian politicians recently as solution to the incessant clashes between herdsmen and farmers which have led to loss of lives and property worth millions of naira. It has however polarised the Nigerian nation with the South (West, East and South South), who are predominantly farmers, rejecting it. Their rejection of this suggestion is based on the suspicion that it is a disguise for the appropriation of their land by the North. Unlike the real world, in the text, both the farmers and the herdsmen are joint owners of the land and so such mistrust does not arise. Importantly, it is evident that Durow and Ehohi have fallen in love and would be getting married. This union of a Fulani with an Idoma is not only symbolic of the unity being preached, but also seals the agreement on the rotational use of the land. This sentiment is captured in a metaphor in the Fulani song of peace (56). In addition to this solution, the joint elders’ council of both communities agree that a legal action be instituted against both Ediga and Laagi. Also Ediga is to be recalled from the National Assembly as representative of the two communities and is to be replaced by Durow.

Thus, Abubakar attempts to prove in *Citizens or Strangers*, just as he does in the *A New Weft in the Loom*, that multi-culturalism itself is not a challenge; the problem lies in the selfish interests of the political class that manipulates the ethnic consciousness of the people and also in the gullibility, complacency and sometimes in the complicity of the people in not realising this and resisting it. In the same manner, just as we have in *A New Weft in the Loom*, the playwright unifies the integral (audience within the play) and the integrated (theatre) audiences as a symbolic representation of his message.

Multi-Culturalism in *Corper'tion*

Unlike in the other two plays discussed earlier, Abubakar approaches the issue of multi-culturalism in *Corper'tion* in a more subtle manner. The conflict in this play text is between the leadership and the followership in a mono ethnic setting. An atmosphere of tension is present from when two Corps members, Duro and Anene, enter the village which looks desolate and uninhabited. The road that leads to the village is so dusty that by the time they alight from the motorcycle that brings them in, they are covered in dust (9). The scary scene is heightened by a paradox; surrounding a river which turns out to be the only one in the village are dead animals (9), yet water is supposed to be a source of life. Hakimi, the ward head, promises to tell them the reason for this, but he never does (10); Duro and Anene find this out themselves later in the course of the story.

As the Corps members settle in the village, they are confronted with problems that are connected with government's neglect of the village. School attendance by pupils in the school run by Duro and Anene is unimpressive and growing leaner because of increasing deaths from the epidemic; people cannot boil drinking water because kerosene is scarce and expensive due to the incessant attacks on a route through which kerosene is transported; and the young school children prefer making money from the lucrative business of the transportation of clean water and kerosene to going to school. Eventually, the school is turned into a sick bay to cater to the growing population of infected people. Through their efforts which are unknown to the ward head, Duro and Anene bring in a group of white medical experts to assist in treating the sick and ecology experts to unravel the cause of the infection. The experts reveal that toxic substances have contaminated the river which is the only source of livelihood for the villagers (32). Meanwhile, the reason Hakimi is unaware of this development is because he has gone to the city where it is revealed that he has colluded with the Chairman of the Local Council and the Commissioner of Environment to misappropriate the council's allocation. This explains the reasons for the government's neglect of the village and its problems.

A dramatic twist is introduced when it turns out that the white experts are also part of the exploitation. This implies the playwright's implication of foreign nations in corruption in Nigeria, and Africa in general, and the attendant underdevelopment of the continent. This portrays these foreign nations as hypocrites in the affairs of the nation, and of Africa in general. In spite of all the

efforts of the conspirators, Duro and Anene with assistance from local hunters in the village, are able to arrest the white men in the village while Duro heads to the city and with the help of another Corps member who serves in a media organisation, calls a media conference at the Criminal Investigation Division. All those involved in the case, including the foreign company concerned, are prosecuted and sentenced with Judge saying hope of a brighter future is certain with youth like Duro (46).

What Abubakar does in this text is to borrow from the core ideals that gave rise to the establishment of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in Nigeria in 1973. The expectation is that young graduates who are posted to various parts of the country other than their own would learn the culture of their places of posting, appreciate these other ethnic groups and their culture and thereby foster unity. His focus on ethnic diversity in this play is thus subtly done. This does not mean that the playwright has a pristine view of the Corps as he begins the play with a focus on some of the corrupt practices in the operations of the Corps (3).

A minor plot in the play text also seems to subtly make reference to ethnic unification through the ideals of the corps. This has to do with the story of Duro, Anene and Alake. From their names, Duro and Alake belong to the same ethnic group and are in a relationship before the play begins. On the other hand, Anene who is posted to Fadaka local government along with Duro, is Igala by ethnic affiliation. Anene and Duro seem to have developed some emotional attachment to each other. When Duro addresses both the integral and integrated audiences to decide for him through voting, which of them he chooses as wife, the play ends abruptly. Duro, in a soliloquy, reveals that:

Since Alake's insinuation, the thought of a relationship with Anene is becoming stronger. Alake and I have come a long way and she is caring in her own way...Uhn, but Alake is not mature; Anene is. She is also strong willed and can weather all storms. As for Alake, she believes so much in money being the ultimate...Alake on her own never listens to any reasons others have to advance the moment she makes up her mind over something...Even a man with such a trait will surely have problems. Anene too is at it now; but I feel I can talk her out of our instant exit. She seems to be cool headed. (40)

Again, as in *A New Weft in the Loom* the separate audiences are merged through a verbal engagement between them and Duro. Character analyses of Anene and Alake would endear the audience to being disposed to preferring Anene to Alake.

While Alake is portrayed as being a spoilt girl who is ready to scuttle Duro's effort at apprehending the conspirators, Anene plays a more important role in the plot. It would therefore be safe to assume that the audiences, especially the real audience, would be more favourably disposed to choosing Anene over Alake. In fact, immediately after their separate soliloquies (Alake, Duro and Anene) towards the end of the play, the stage direction reads thus: "Exits (i.e. Anene) and on her way to Duro's house meets him heading for hers. They hold hands and turn towards her house" (40). All these point to the fact of Anene being the most likely to be chosen by the audience and this is in conformity with the unification of ethnic groups being advocated in the text.

Conclusion

Our discussion in the three plays of Abdullahi Salih Abubakar studied in this paper, has revealed that Abubakar's focus is on socio-economic and political ills in the society and how multi-culturalism can be used as an aesthetic in mediating in these challenges. From his plays, it can be deduced that the writer does not perceive multi-culturalism and ethnic consciousness as negative. What should be avoided is their abuse and what should be promoted is their cultivation as a unifying force. Names of characters, songs and dances in the three play texts are employed by the writer to complement his use of multi-culturalism as remedy to the ills in the society. These are used to delineate ethnic affiliations.

Thus, as a writer, Abubakar's recourse to multi-culturalism is as a medium to present ethnic related issues and proffer necessary solutions to them. We therefore conclude that ethnic pride is an important aspect of human life in a multi-cultural society as it buttresses the love of one's cultural heritage. However, it should not be a reason for ethnic conflict; rather it should be an avenue to create mutual understanding among the various cultures for necessary progress and development.

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