



Collaboration as a Tool for Nation Building: A Reading of Ahmed Yerima's *The Lottery Ticket*

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Abstract

African playwrights engage their work in nation building by suggesting solutions to societal and national problems, Raji-Oyelade (2023). Although, some still focus on dramatising the problems alone, many ensure to suggest solutions Olayinka (2023). Ahmed Yerima, in most of his plays, does not only satirise problems, he almost always suggests possible remedies. *The Lottery Ticket* is a quintessential play which does not only examine the problems in the continent but goes further to proffer a likely way out of the problem. This study utilises a critical descriptive method to read Ahmed Yerima's *The Lottery Ticket*. The objective of the study is to explicate collaboration as one of the strategies for solving Africa's problems as put forward in *The Lottery Ticket*. The theory of African Renaissance, a questionably offshoot of Pan Africanism, which believes among other things in the capacity of Africa to solve her problems is used to critically examine the play text. The study discovers that post-independence African writers no longer dwell on the problems solely but have also been suggesting solutions. The paper thus affirms that literature is a strategic tool for nation building.

Keywords: African Renaissance, Collaboration, Problem, Solution, Nation Building

Introduction

Africa as a continent is bedevilled by problems which have become major thematic preoccupations for literary texts by Africans. In post/neocolonial Nigeria for example, the harsh lived experiences of Nigerians after independence are a common springboard of Nigerian literature. Nigerian playwrights have continued to reflect and refract on the social, political and economic ruptures that have characterised the nation since independence in 1960. The purpose of this study is to investigate the postcolonial themes that are brought to the fore in Ahmed Yerima's *The Lottery Ticket* as well as the strategic solutions suggested there in. While the first generation of Nigerian playwrights engaged the imperialists, the second-generation deployed Marxism to fight the internal oppressors, the third and fourth generations of playwrights that Yerima belongs, a justification for this is one of the points of contacts between the third and fourth generations of African writers which can be seen in some works of Ahmed Yerima, that is the particularistic attention given to individual with a view to explaining the negative influence of the post and neocolonial lived experiences on them. They have continued to focus on the individual rather than the whole community like the first and second generations not only with the intention of dramatising the effects of the post and neocolonial disenchantment on them but to also examine the coping strategies employed by them to navigate the contemporary issues.

Thus, the selected play for investigation in this study focuses not only on the dehumanising effects of hardship on people but also the strategies being employed to mitigate them. The inspiration behind *The Lottery Ticket* are the economic, social and political realities of the post and neocolonial Nigeria. Paramount in its engagement is the rupture that affects all the fabrics of the nation.

Research Question

Is collaboration a tool for nation building in Ahmed Yerima's *The Lottery Ticket*?

Objective of the Study:

The study seeks to affirm that collaboration is a tool for nation building as evident in Ahmed Yerima's *Lottery Ticket*.



Theoretical Framework

In an attempt to solve the problems of Africa, much socio-political and economic road maps have been formulated, revised and adopted. Many of these road maps were crafted by foreign individuals and conglomerates such as the IMF and the World Bank. It has dawned on Africa that no one outside of Africa can be interested in the development of Africa like Africa because the people of Africa have continued to bear the brunt of austerity measures as conditions engendered by the loans from these foreign bodies and the economy of Africa is largely facing recession, even total collapse in most African nations as their economies are influenced by economic and financial regulations from such organisations. This has been succinctly put in the words of Kwame Nkrumah that “the whole economy (of Africa) is geared to the foreign capital that dominates it” (11). This, among others, is the brain behind the efforts to begin to critically look inward for home grown solutions to problems that are peculiar to Africa. African Renaissance, popularised by the former South African president, Tabo Mbeki (in his speeches and a conference held to discuss the idea) is a robust framework which calls for endogenous strategies to solve problems of Africa (Diop, C, A, (1996); Mbeki, T, (1998); Kroeker, L. (2022) and Lieketseng, N. (2022)). Essentially, in his classic on African Renaissance, *Something Torn and New: The African Renaissance*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o submits that the African renaissance is nascent, yet to be fully established. This however does not mean it is not working already. It foregrounds ‘African-ness’ which makes it a veritable home-grown remedy for African problems.

To Ngugi, the African Renaissance is a movement which will remember Africa with her past (101-200). In a simple term, renaissance is the resurgence and resurgence is only conceivable where birth has previously happened. Globally and, particularly in places such as Europe and Haiti, renaissance is represented by the resuscitation of a deceased or fading culture which in turn gives birth to something basically new. In England for instance, renaissance revived poetry and classical arts while it also gave rise to humanism.

The logic behind the impression of the African Renaissance in the current situation induces an assessment of the whole initiative to ascertain how far it has achieved and that which is yet to be achieved. Serious efforts have been invested to reinstate Africa to a condition of harmony and stability in the spheres of culture, politics and economy. Pioneered and largely constructed by the likes of Marcus Garvey, Alexander Crummel, Edward Blyden, George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta, Tom Mboya, Kwame Nkrumah and Obafemi Awolowo among several others, Pan-Africanism was a desire to politically and culturally unite people of African descent. The priority of Pan-Africanism is to ensure the political well-being of Africans. Negritude, founded by Aime Cesaire, Leon Damas and Leopold Sedar Senghor, protested against racialism and the French colonial programme of assimilation. It also emphasised the beauty and importance of blackness. The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) steered by Steve Biko, Mamphela Ramphele, Barney Pityana and Bennie Khoapa fought against apartheid in South Africa. All these movements and others such as Afro-modernism are wrapped in the African Renaissance. African Renaissance is an all-inclusive effort geared towards a thorough resurgence of Africa – politically, culturally, socio-economically (Jesutomi Orija, 2024). Ngugi concludes that “African Renaissance means, first and foremost, the economic and political recovery of the continent’s power, as enshrined in the vision of Pan-Africanism” (11). The relevance of African Renaissance as a useful literary theory has been rigorously discussed by literary theorists and critics such as Kroeker, L. (2022) and Lieketseng, N. (2022).

The Lottery Ticket: A Synopsis

The play dramatises the life of seven people who are all semi-literates and illiterates. An uneducated fifty years old woman, Mama Lizi, operates a local eatery. She is depicted as a sturdy woman who is not only passionate about her trade but also willing to venture into any money-spinning endeavour. Her daughter, Lizi, eighteen years old provides a helping hand to her mother at the shop. Although, she claims to be a Christian she is involved with Danger, a well-known criminal. Lizi who trained as a seamstress is a little more intelligent than her mother is. This shows in her succinct comments on contemporary issues. Then the sixty years old Landlord, who is a retired public servant and the owner of the building Mama Lizi and Lizi are living in, partners with Mma Lizi and Lizi in their food business. He is presented as a very



covetous, dishonest and wicked fellow. He will rather have money than save human lives. The law officers in the play are 'Yellow Fever', a traffic officer, and 'Sajent', a police officer.

Faces of Corruption in *The Lottery Ticket*

The Lottery Ticket exposes that the greed, fraud and evils of the proletariats in the society can be worse than those of the ruling class whom they often blame for their predicament. Yerima's portrayal of his drama personages is real and thus making them good tools for scrutinising societal issues. Essentially, the play *The Lottery Ticket* argues that majority of the lower-class members are devoid of human compassion. There are seven characters in *The Lottery Ticket* which depict some faces of corruption among the masses of Nigeria.

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'Sajent: Now, now. I want una to know say I be gazetted Police Sajent. If not to say book don spoil we country, I for don be ASP or even DSP, but na as God want am so. Dis case simple, but e fit hard. All dey for una hand. If una see me well, na as una talk and wan do am, na so gofment go take hear am.

Landlord: ... Oga Sajent, how much you wan?

Sajent: Good una get sense. Each dead body na three hundred naira. Say I come look for them, two hundred naira.(46).

The corruption in the Nigeria Police Force is endemic as it flows from the officers to their men. The embodiment of the corrupt practices in the Nigeria Police Force in the play is Sajent. He has a monetary value for every crime and he charges suspects accordingly.

'Sajent: Wait, den say I write the report, another two hundred naira. One thousand-naira na him I go collect for dis case' (47).

Every individual in the play, *The Lottery Ticket*, aside Lizi is ready to murder anyone just to obtain the lottery ticket. The lust for money makes Mama Lizi willing to lure her daughter into marriage with her landlord just because she does not want to continue to pay rent. Her justification for such an indecent act is that it is a 'business' for her to trade the happiness of her only child for a monthly rent.

Mama Lizi: Lizi if oga Landlord serious, say I no go pay rent, abeg make you give am eye small.

Lizi: Mama!

Mama Lizi: Na business me I dey' (11).

The fact that we pray and yet could not solve basic existential problems is made reference to in *The Lottery Ticket*: "Na as Muslim dey beg, Christian dey beg' (19). Lizi further derides the materialistic tendency of Nigerians as they only often pray for material things rather than spiritual needs. This is corruption. She gives an account of an incidence during a typical Sunday worship service where a particular person who is believed to be spirit possessed begins to prophesy to warn a particular car owner about a looming



danger. As she calls the car number, the displeasure of everyone presents at the service including the clergy man was not hidden because they thought the numbers called were for lottery.

The other two personalities in the play are Danger and Baba Tailor. The former is a hardened criminal who engages in robbery and violent attacks on innocent people. As a young man who is just twenty years old, Danger is the metaphor for the consequences of the social, political and economic failures on the youth of postcolonial Nigeria. Living up to his name, Danger has no regard for human life apart from Lizi he fondly calls 'sweet potato' (21). As such, the singular person he listens to is Lizi. He is loosed with prostitutes and kills at will for money.

'Danger: 'Na not-nine-not self even tug go dey use. I fit just hold the telefon say make dem wet one man with petrol, or burn one opponent shop. I tell you tief na tief. As politics dey go nuclear, na so tug work go go nuclear. As my man dey swear oath to chop Nigeria for Aso rock na so me too go dey swear to chop de man' (29). (SE: Criminal will use mobile 090 mobile phone line. I might use the phone to command my boys to pour fuel on a political opponent's shop. A thief is a thief. In as much as politics is becoming vibrant, so is criminality. Just as my political boss is taking his oath of office in Aso Rock to drain Nigeria of its wealth, I will also take my own oath to drain the man of his loot.(SE)

Essentially drawing from the Standard English version of the Pidgin English used in the text, the iconic 'not-nine-not typifies the technologically advanced way of criminality either in the high ranking political offices or among the hardened criminals on the streets

The system that transforms an innocent young man into 'Danger' finds a job ready for him as an arm wielding thug being used to wound, kill and destroy political opponents or business competitors. Being an intelligent person, he is able to discern that the oath of office taken by Nigerian politicians is an access "... to chop Nigeria for Aso Rock ..." (29). Aso Rock is a metaphor for political offices in Nigeria. The only reason for vying for political offices in Nigeria according to Danger is to loot the treasury.

The last and only morally upright personality in the play is the seventy years old sickly man called Baba Tailor. His winning of the Tuba Cola Lottery is a poetic reward for his integrity. Though he is good hearted, his health has greatly deteriorated. His ill-health can mean two things: it represents the poverty level in the country and; secondly, it is a metaphor for fragile almost dead morality and high ethics in Nigeria. The need for the preservation of one's rightfully acquired property in the face of crass greed in the environment is heightened as all the other characters thought he has died and begin to plan how to pick his ticket. When he wakes up, the first thing he asks for is his ticket: '*Wey my ticket? Where I put am?*' (50).

Collaboration as Strategic Tool for Nation Building in *The Lottery Ticket*

Collaboration is the well-arranged system which involves information sharing, resource allocation and delegation of duties which entails conceiving, implementing and evaluating carefully constructed efforts geared towards realising set goals for the collective good (Nakamura, H., & Chen, W. L., 2023). Collaboration, more precisely, is 'the collective involvement of individuals in a synchronised activity to resolve a common struggle'. (Lai, 2011). There may however never be collaboration or cooperation except there are common aims and objectives, equity, robust negotiation, serious interaction and interdependency (Bakti, I., Zubair, F., & Budiana, H.R., 2023).

Nigeria, which could be said to be prone to disaster, needs help to come out of the claws of 'Danger', who is the dramatic personification of the post/neo-colonial tragedies Nigerians are experiencing. According to what is garnered from the text, a collaborative effort among Nigerians must be put in place to not only eradicate the problems but to also ensure that such do not occur in the nation again.

This hint is suggested by the text when Landlord and Mama Lizi had to bribe the law officers, Sajent and Yellow Fever, to ensure that Danger's death is not uncovered. It is their visit to the station that reveals the height of rot in the Nigerian Police Force. Essentially, literature generally or drama in specific language utilises 'masks' to achieve its 'tasks'; thus, the idea of two people coming together to bribe a



corrupt officer of the law is not to be taken for a face value as it metaphorically and satirically lampoons the law offenders now parading as law enforcement officers. Not only that, the fact that the two people could dare to bribe a police officer speaks volume about the rot in the Nigerian state. However, as it has been said earlier in this study, the act by these people only suggests to us that if we as a people of Nigeria can synergise, we can always meet our needs, solve our individual problems and thereby build the nation. Aside this, the partnership cafeteria business among Mama, Lizi and the Landlord is another dramatic way of suggesting that, unemployment, poverty and vices can be conquered if we can pull resources together as the trio do. While the landlord eats from the cafeteria, he provides the capital and the space. Mama Lizi does the cooking while Lizi serves customers. In addition, the joint-effort between the Tuba Cola manufacturing company and the broadcasting stations shows that economic prosperity can be achieved via collaboration.

'Sajent: Now, now. I want una to know say I be gazetted Police Sagent. If not to say book don spoil we country, I for don be ASP or even DSP, but na as God want am so. Dis case simple, but e fit hard. All dey for una hand. If una see me well, na as una talk and wan do am, na so gofment go take hear am.

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Although the set goal is achieved, when the common enemy, Danger is killed by the collaborative effort of the people in the play, the question is can we really blame the police officers who demand for bribes in the cause of carrying out their official duties when it is a common knowledge that an average police officer in Nigeria buys his uniform himself. In fact, many of them paid handsomely to be recruited into the Nigeria Police Force. Yerima is not out to blame or exonerate anyone; his duty is to bring to our consciousness the reality we are aware of but shy away from so that we can deeply interrogate them and find means of resolving them. The idea of jungle justice may not be the best but this is only an ironic way of hinting the reader/audience that common adversaries such as insecurity and hunger among others can be decimated through collaboration. Through the text, Yerima seems not only trying to project the actualities of the common people on the streets of Nigeria, it can also be deduced from the work that some of the actions as violent and criminal as they can be are towards a collective good. Thus, rather than collaborating to murder a perceived criminal, Nigerians can as well collaborate to solve their problems using the right means.

Conclusion

The harsh socio-economic realities on ground in Nigeria calls for immediate search for solutions. Nigerians have come almost to the point that the only thing they can afford now is who/whatever will bring respite to them. As such, literature as it is practiced by the likes of Ahmed Yerima and which has been captured as literature for development's sake (Yerima, 2023; Raji-Oyelade, 2023) is a major instrument we can all begin to look up to for ideas we all can experiment with in our collective search for an urgent way out of this quagmire. The play, *The Lottery Ticket*, suggests that a collective effort is needed to end social, political and economic problems in the country as exemplified by Danger's death as the people rise against him collectively. This is exactly what African Renaissance is all about: Africa for Africa. That is, Africa solving her own problems without going hand in cap to Europe, America or Asia. The major cause of Danger's death, though it is not made explicit, is however alluded to in the play that his demise comes by the collective effort of the people who could no longer endure the pain he unleashes on them.



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