

THE PARADOX OF SERVITUDE: A SOCIO-POLITICAL READING OF EMEKA NWABUEZE'S *A PARLIAMENT OF VULTURES*

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Abstract: This paper seeks to illustrate that African politicians are not motivated by the call to serve, but are rather interested in amassing wealth, power and positions for themselves. Patterns of bad governance which have sunk into the marrow of political vultures causing countries to wallow in socio-political and economic degradation are equally identified. The paper further contends that the socio-political perspective can be transformed if the masses choose to rise against “political vultures” who desecrate the servant-leadership policy. Consequently, this paper advocates a servant-leadership approach as a major prerequisite for leadership scramble for the socio-political and economic buoyancy of the society. Adopting contextual analysis as its analytical standpoint, the paper, through the lens of servant-leadership theory, elaborates the fact that *A Parliament of Vultures* exhibits common realities in Nigeria's political landscape as well as the projection of drama as a channel of raising awareness and conscientizing the people, hence, the place of theatre of conscientization in Nigerian dramaturgy.

Key words: paradox; servant-leadership; socio-political; vultures; conscientization.

1. Introduction

A Parliament of Vultures mirrors the realities of party politics in Nigeria and Africa in general as it unveils parliamentary misconduct and leadership failure. This stems from concerns such as greed, corruption, incompetence, favoritism, illiteracy and pride. The word “parliamentarian” brings to focus the idea of an elected representative of a group of people. For an elected representative, the goodwill, wellbeing and aspirations of the people should be considered first. This expounds on the readiness to serve the people whom the parliamentarian is representing, and the people expect their voices to be heard through their elected representative. This builds trust which from the outset is sacrificed by the people with high hopes of enjoying good governance and leadership. However,

Emeka Nwabueze, in *A Parliament of Vultures*, paints a satirical picture of parliamentarians such as Habamero, Rev. Jossy, Madam Omeaku and Mr. Brown, who fidget their way into the political arena seeking to devour the country's resources and economically incapacitate the nation with reckless abandon.

As a people's representative, the call to serve is eminent; a call to serve the people through leadership, guidance and selflessness. Even though a member of parliament's position is esteemed and revered, with the concerned stepping into the shoes of the “master”, in real essence, he is a “servant” of the people. What a paradox! Considering the quest for a utopic and flawless society, a classless society of conscience-driven politicians and leaders should be encouraged in a bid to deconstruct what Emeka Aniago in “Political Culture as a Product of Social Constructs in Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures*” refers to as “the concept of gutter politics” (Nwabueze, 2011, 68). The term ‘gutter’ metaphorically suggests filth, dirt, refuse and a non-accommodating object or phenomenon, and if it features in a political circle like the parliament, then the essence

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of good governance, patriotism and servitude is thwarted. Rather, *A Parliament of Vultures* depicts power-hungry, greedy, corrupt, senseless and callous parliamentarians who have chosen to sit on their consciences and plunge the nation and its people into abject poverty and misery. They are vultures in the true sense of the word and would spare no iota of their muscle to see that the few opposing ones (Otobo and Dr. Parkers) are wiped out. It is, however, important to note that the play's major preoccupations are not only peculiar to Nigeria, but Africa and the world.

Servant-leadership theory is the theoretical orientation of this paper. Larry Spears, in "Reflections on Robert K. Greenleaf and Servant-Leadership", defines servant-leadership as "a new kind of leadership model – a model which puts serving others as the number one priority. Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promoting a sense of community; and the sharing of power in decision-making (Spears, 1996, 33). Servant-leadership theory emerged following the proposition of Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970. This theory submits that a leader's primary role is to render service to others. It points out that a great leader is seen as servant first. According to Greenleaf in *The Servant as Leader*, "the great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness" (Greenleaf, 1970, 2). Thus, the motivation to lead must arise from the desire to serve others. It is important to note that the call to serve is so strong, stronger than a profession which one chooses because of the need to work and earn money to enjoy the finer things of life. This, unfortunately, is the course which the "vultures" in Nwabueze's *Parliament* have chosen to follow with unlimited determination and greed.

2. The Reality Behind the Play

Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* unravels the dubious and speedy rise of Mrs. Omeaku, the lone lady member of parliament, from an illiterate roadside food and liquor seller to a parliamentarian. Her journey into the House of Assembly provokes Nwabueze's satirical ink to flow and rebuke her and other villainous political actors who dubiously secure their seats in the Parliament. Mrs. Omeaku's low pedigree does not

qualify her as a suitable candidate for the post she occupies in Parliament, but she and her accomplices used the tools of blackmail and corruption to rig the election. Declared winner, she proudly introduces her daughter, Nkechi, to her flirtatious lifestyle in a bid to groom her into her kind of prosperity.

Mrs. Omeaku's new way of life sparks domestic squabbles and imbalance between her and her husband. She makes a mockery of her husband, reminding him that he has worked for over thirty years in the civil service, yet cannot boast of a house for himself. She uses her position as a parliamentarian to challenge Mr. Omeaku that she has acquired wealth and property just within a year. She boasts of houses in and out of the country as well as fleet of cars, not to talk of providing one to her "car less" husband, all acquired through unorthodox means.

Nwabueze presents Mrs. Omeaku as a glaring example of corruption, avariciousness and callousness, a cankerworm which has eaten deep into the Nigerian political space. He also reminds his audience that amidst such political bad eggs are a few ideal, trustworthy and patriotic ones like Otobo and Dr. Parkers who are always sidelined, relegated, silenced, eschewed, threatened and even embarrassed because they have chosen not to compromise and condescend to their gimmicks and maneuverings. This goes to confirm Wole Soyinka's statement in *The Trials of Brother Jero* that "In fact, there are eggs and there are eggs" (Soyinka, 1964, 9), which, in the context of *A Parliament of Vultures*, means there are good parliamentarians as well as bad ones. The play ends with the youths' revolt against the parliamentarians who attempt to escape.

3. The Paradox of Servitude in *A Parliament of Vultures*

Nwabueze in *A Parliament of Vultures* paints a vivid picture of the Nigerian parliament where members of the National Assembly are deeply involved in corruption, financial squandermania and self-aggrandizement to the detriment of the entire nation whom they owe the duty to serve. Madam Omeaku, an illiterate food and liquor seller and wife of Mr. Omeaku, a retired school teacher, manipulates her way to power and is voted to render service to the country through the

House of Assembly. However, she, like other members, openly and shamelessly decides to empty state coffers to satisfy their selfish desires. This brings to focus the notion of political realism which confirms the need to satisfy one's needs first, a sharp contrast to servant-leadership values which preach against self-aggrandizement. It is clear that Madam Omeaku and her accomplices, who occupy the parliamentary bench, are absolutely not willing to serve as required, but to aspire to the top, to siphon and squander state funds with reckless endangerment:

Madam: ...*Imagine the likeness! A whole honourable member of the House of Assembly! A future aspirant to the senate, et cetera. What will my political colleagues say if they find out that I have a daughter who dresses like this? How can I ...* (Nwabueze, 2011, 7).

The spirit of servitude is completely absent in the character of Madam Omeaku. She is not out to serve, but to get to the top where she is sure her financial security would be guaranteed, and that is why she indulges in financial misappropriation. She is only worried about what others will say concerning her daughter, and not what she considers to be right. She is disturbed about her daughter's dress manner not because of ethical training, but because her political position maybe threatened.

Madam Omeaku's actions and utterances aptly describe her intentions of joining the parliamentary race. Despite her poor level of education, she applies tact and deceit to position herself and her daughter, Nkechi, in parliament. Instead of concentrating on building the nation and serving her people, she cares less about her colleagues and stops at nothing to use her daughter to remove Mr. Ootobo, the secretary, so that she (Madam Omeaku) occupies the same position in the Parliament. Nwabueze's satirical lens do not spare Mr. Brown, a corrupt and immoral parliamentarian like Madam Omeaku. Mr. Brown is guilty of rigging elections for Dr. Parkers and proudly explains how he achieved it:

Brown: ... *After all, what was the worth of his campaign? He could've crashed like a pack of cards if I hadn't stepped in to rescue him. Fortunately, the Returning Officer was my classmate. It wasn't difficult for me to negotiate the right figures for him as I did in your own case* (Nwabueze, 2011, 10).

Mr. Brown's success in rigging elections in favour of Madam Omeaku and Dr. Parkers confirms the fact that electoral misconduct is a common practice in Africa, especially in Nigeria. The electoral system is fragile and the leaders have chosen not to fine-tune it because of selfish motives and lack of will to demonstrate servant-leadership qualities; the call to serve the ruled.

The manipulation of votes is a cankerworm driving countries in Africa into socio-political and economic inferno. Dr. Parkers was rigged into the House of Assembly in order to ease the siphoning of state funds without the USA government getting informed of their intention because he had lived there for many years. The "vultures" seek bogus titles like Dr., Reverend, Professor, Chief, Alhaji, Big Boy, Madam Ho-ha, etc. in order to instill confidence in the people. Brown calls Madam Omeaku's attention to the fact that Reverend Jossy took the title of Reverend during the campaigns because some credibility from voters was required:

Brown: ... *Forget about him. We called him reverend during the campaigns because we thought that the title would purchase us some credibility from the voters. And it worked!* (Nwabueze, 2011, 11).

Brown is proud to refer to himself as a "political juggernaut" (Nwabueze, 2011, 11), considering himself an expert in political maneuvering; a tool he uses for selfish motives. His actions prove that he is not willing to serve the people. He rather cooperates with Madam Omeaku who only surrounds herself with people who are willing to dance to the rhythm of the music she plays.

It is important to note that the Parliament is an arm of the government of a country charged with the daunting responsibility of assessing bills and putting them to law for the interest of the people and the country. Nwabueze's "vultures", however, have abused their tasks and are more interested in carving financial niches for themselves. They embark on gluttonous missions and are ready to leave the coffers dry. Wasteful entertainment has become the order of the day and Bob Brown is quite sure Chief Nathaniel Habamero, the House Speaker will "have to put the expenses into the entertainment vote" (Nwabueze, 2011, 22). It can be seen that the leadership of Nwabueze's "vultures" is morally rotten at the top as the House

Speaker is the one who masterminds corrupt and greedy practices. Instead of instituting sanity, his words and actions testify that he encourages his subordinates in the House of Assembly to deviate from their responsibility of serving the nation selflessly and wholeheartedly embrace the act of feeding fat on state funds. According to Philip Peter Akoje, “the vultures are more concerned about eating and drinking and cooling off. The leadership of the Parliamentarians is based on greed and debauchery” (Akoje, 2018, 91).

When Parliamentarians meet in his house, instead of making plans on how to execute economic policies that would benefit the nation, Habamero reveals what would be of interest to himself and his henchmen:

Habamero: *This is only to kick-start the day. We shall move from here to the Hilton. My special assistant has already made reservations for us. We shall eat and drink until we're saturated. Then we shall check into a presidential suite to cool off before returning to our homes* (Nwabueze, 2011, 26).

The gluttonous habit of the Parliamentarians is a reality which Emeka Nwabueze seeks to lampoon. Habamero and his cohorts are more concerned with the policy of self-aggrandizement. They have buried their consciences and go ahead to “approve the sum of two million naira for each member as inconvenience allowance” (Nwabueze, 2011, 27). This amount could go a long way to solve a social or economic preoccupation, which would benefit the people, but they choose to satisfy their greed without giving a thought of how it would ruin the nation and drive it into economic recession. Quoting Ini Ekott, Akoje reveals that:

The Nigerian Assembly is regarded as one of the world's most experience when measured against the standard of living of an average Nigerian, and the government's total revenue and spending. The assembly spends a total of N150 billion annually which is three percent of the entire federal budget as at 2013 (Ekott, 2014).

The submission above highlights that political leaders in Nigeria and other parts of Africa are more concerned with spending fabulous sums of money on luxuries whenever they deem it necessary, not bothering about the pain and misery suffered by the masses. They no longer bother about criticisms because they are

confident that they would defend themselves by engaging in more spending and distribution of “brown envelopes”. Habamero is absolutely assertive that he would manipulate the Press to report positively on Parliamentary projects:

Habamero: *We shall organize a party for Pressmen. Call it press conference if you like and follow it up with refreshments and appropriate brown envelopes. That will be at Hilton. Tell them they can sleep overnight if they like. After all, we can book the whole rooms in the Hilton in case of eventuality. Nkechi can come with her young friends and chat up the journalists. Then, everything will be reported as we deem fit* (Nwabueze, 2011, 29).

This shows the high level of corruption that takes place in parliament. The parliamentarians have what it takes to manipulate the people's consciences to their favour. This reveals the gullibility of the masses as a result of their desperate conditions that have reduced them to be manipulated, bribed and corrupted because of the dire need for material gains.

Bate Besong, a Cameroonian prolific playwright and poet, is venomous with leadership practice in Africa. In his poem “Their Champagne Party will End”, he lampoons the corrupt leadership of whites and politicians who exploit the country and feed fat on its resources rendering the masses helpless. He is, however, optimistic that the atrocities caused by the so-called leaders will end one day. He submits that:

Indeed, they have sworn fealty to their masonic lodges & to each other to bankrupt our national coffers. The curse on the heads of the corrupt banditti. There is evidence that evil still survives absolutely and the only good is a cripple, chained to a dungeon of Mockery and dust. But their champagne party will end (Besong, 1986, 12).

Besong bemoans the socio-political landscape, and like Nwabueze, is conscious of his art and the need to serve his country in particular and Africa in general through social and political satire. Besong underlines this view when he posits that “mine has been a vision of writing as a vibrant social institution that... protests against injustices committed against the marginalized and bruised in the name of politics” (Ashuntantang & Tande, 2008, 55).

The call to serve, which is subsumed in leadership potentials, is laid bare by Daryl Hoobs and Ronald Power, who posit that “leadership is to democracy as water is to plant growth” (Hoobs & Powers, 1976, 1). This brings to the limelight, the complementarity between the ruler and the ruled, stressing on the necessity for servant-leadership disposition. In *A Parliament of Vultures*, the President expounds on political realism, but the political ambition of African leaders is geared towards accumulation of wealth. The President sounds as a political realist when he says:

President: Thank you very much... A good leader finds time to be with his subjects to discuss some very pressing issues which may sound confusing to his subjects, but which he, as the President of this great nation, has the right answers to. The President is the servant of the people and the people he rules are his masters. But the Master-Servant relationship is more of a verbal thing than actual reality (*laughs*) (Nwabueze, 2011, 93).

Nwabueze helps his audience to understand the political realities in a so-called political system. Even the award of public contracts is void of meritocracy, but to a greater extent based on favoritism. Novices have flooded the field to execute contracts simply because they have a social bond with leaders who do not consider the welfare of the nation. The President puts it categorically and rhetorically:

President: ... *My government believes in the preservation of culture. In our culture you have to haggle with the seller in order to get a good deal. As for the second question, would you award a contract to a person who is not your friend? I ask you, would you? (sighs). Next question, please* (Nwabueze, 2011, 96).

Every democratic nation brandishes a well-articulated constitution which is geared towards good governance. However, the democratic leadership in Nigeria focuses more on political realism with very little or no consideration of the needs of the population. In this society, like in most African societies, it is not what you know but who you know that counts. This implies that, your know-how does not count when the employer has someone in mind to employ. This equally disrupts the quality of products fashioned, given that inexperienced people are given opportunities that they

know nothing about, whereas, experts in the field without “godfathers” languish in poverty. Akoje observes that:

Though democracy is a working system of governance; because its practices and ideological application differ from countries to countries, but democratic leadership in Nigeria is more politically realistic types that centre on selfish interest on the side of the leaders to the detriment of the masses. The Parliamentarians are supposed to be servant first; a principle advocated by servant-leadership theorists (Akoje, 2018, 94).

Glaringly, the objective of most political aspirants in the African political turf is not to contribute to the building to the nation, but for egocentric purposes, to amass wealth and make a name for themselves to the detriment of the masses. That is why the political turf is flooded with amateurs, novices and illiterates whose prime motive is to stuff their mouths with the national cake. Madam Omeaku experienced poverty and misery when she was growing up as a child and would do everything possible to catch up with what she thinks every African political aspirant, except the few ideal ones like Otobo and Dr. Parkers, who are the servant-leaders, does. Madam Omeaku has acquired wealth through dubious means and is proud to say that:

Madam: I now live in my own fifty-hectre estate, completed three buildings in Commercial Avenue, and set up an import and export business for my husband to manage... So far I've been able to purchase only three different models of the Mercedes, one model of BMW, and a Lexus, and sent my children to study in America (Nwabueze, 2011, 102-103).

Here, Madam Omeaku seems to be counting her blessings and naming them one after the other, although she sounds unsatisfied. Her greed and gluttonous drive come as a result of her fear of ever revisiting the ugly side of poverty. A glimpse of her past saddens her heart and motivates her to accumulate superfluous wealth. She says firmly that:

Madam: *When a child is bitten by a snake he fears the earth worm. I've had my own share of poverty in the past. Now that God has buttered my bread, I'll never allow myself to be poor again. Not in this world, or even*

in the world to come. I'll make enough money to last me two lifetimes (Nwabueze, 2011, 101).

Madam Omeaku is just a microcosm of the class of politicians who focus on wealth and power rather than the call to serve in leadership. This satirical bullet does not miss Rahman Taslim Lejoka Brown in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. Lejoka Brown retires as a major in the army and joins politics because of greed, quest for wealth, fame and power. He discloses his mission to Okonkwo, his friend:

Lejoka-Brown: *Politics is a thing now in Nigeria, mate. You want to be famous? Politics. You want to chop life? ...you want to chop a big slice of the National cake? – Na Politics... Once we get elected to the top, wallahi, we shall stuff ourselves with huge mouthfuls of the National Chin-chin... something you'll eat and eat brothers, and you know you've eaten something* (Rotimi, 2008, 4).

This implies that Lejoka-Brown, like Madam Omeaku, wants to do what he thinks every African politician does. Rotimi and Nwabueze decry the desecration of politics in Nigeria and Africa as a whole through the portrait of Lejoka-Brown and Madam Omeaku, respectively. Thus, the servant-leadership phenomenon is far-fetched and does not feature in the agenda of these two characters.

Nwabueze's satirical concern in *A Parliament of Vultures* is to expose political buffoonery in Africa, conscientize the masses and provoke change in the habits of political vultures. The action of the youths at the end of the play suggests that the masses have been conscientized and have chosen to rise against the dilapidating political system that has plunged the economy into chaos. Through the following stage direction, the audience is informed that the youths have staged a fight against the Members of Parliament:

More harsh songs pierce the walls of the parliamentary building. The agitators are now singing solidarity songs. Shouts of "Down with oppressors!" "Death to Anarchy", "No more squandermania" are now distinct (Nwabueze, 2011, 112).

The action of the youths suggests that their expectations have been thwarted by the so-called leaders, and they now demonstrate their frustrations

through a revolution in a bid to decry the injustices of the oppressors.

4. Conclusion

In retrospect, this paper demonstrates that the precarious socio-political and economic problem in Africa has occurred as a result of poor leadership. Selflessness, in particular, is absent in the political agenda of a majority of African leaders whose shoulders lie the responsibility of developing their nations socially, economically and politically. A careful analysis of Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* underscores the selfishness, unpatriotic and villainous behaviours of political leaders who think that they can get away with their excesses simply because they are at the helm. Another close examination of the play dwells on the fact that there are no stiff measures put in place to check the excesses of the leaders in some African countries. If stringent measures were taken, corruption, gluttony, siphoning of public funds would be eradicated and enough money would remain available to improve the economy. This can be achieved through radical means in a bid to purge selfish leaders and pave the way for servant-leadership, thereby instituting sanity in governance and reducing misery in the masses. In a nutshell, the place of drama is clearly defined as a tool for promoting public awareness, as explored in Emeka Nwabueze's art.

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NGHỊCH LÝ CỦA SỰ PHỤC VỤ: TÁC PHẨM NGHỊ VIỆN CỦA NHỮNG CON KÈN KÈN (A PARLIAMENT OF VULTURES) CỦA EMEKA NWABUEZE TỪ GÓC NHÌN CHÍNH TRỊ XÃ HỘI

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Tóm tắt: Bài báo này cho thấy các chính trị gia châu Phi không bị thúc đẩy bởi lời kêu gọi phục vụ nhân dân, mà bởi mối quan tâm đến việc tích lũy của cải, quyền lực, và vị thế cho bản thân. Các mô hình quản trị kém cỏi hiện đang tồn tại vốn đã ăn sâu vào xương tủy của những con “kèn kèn chính trị” khiến quốc gia chìm trong suy thoái kinh tế và chính trị-xã hội. Bài báo cũng khẳng định quan điểm chính trị-xã hội có thể thay đổi nếu quần chúng lựa chọn chống lại những con “kèn kèn”, những kẻ vốn xem thường đường lối lãnh đạo phục vụ. Do đó, bài báo này ủng hộ đường hướng lãnh đạo phục vụ như một điều kiện tiên quyết để nắm được quyền lãnh đạo đối với sự phát triển kinh tế và chính trị-xã hội của đất nước. Sử dụng phương pháp phân tích bối cảnh, bài báo thông qua lăng kính của thuyết lãnh đạo phục vụ chỉ ra rằng tác phẩm Nghị viện của những con kèn kèn phản ánh thực trạng phổ biến của bối cảnh chính trị Nigeria, đồng thời cho thấy khả năng sử dụng kịch như một kênh thức tỉnh và nâng cao nhận thức chính trị xã hội cho người dân, từ đó, thể hiện vai trò thức tỉnh của kịch trong nền kịch học Nigeria..

Từ khóa: nghịch lý; lãnh đạo phục vụ; chính trị-xã hội; kèn kèn; sự thức tỉnh.