



CHRIS NWAMUO'S *THE PRISONERS* AND *THE SQUEEZE* AS REFLECTIONS OF A NATION IN DIRE NEED OF LEADERSHIP ATTITUDINAL RE-ORIENTATION: A DIALOGIC APPROACH

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Abstract:

This study on "Chris Nwamuo's *The Prisoners* and *The Squeeze* as reflections of a nation in dire need of leadership attitudinal re-orientation: a dialogic approach", examines the worrying and vexed problem of the failure of political leadership in Nigeria. Using the theory of dialogism to interrogate and challenge political leadership in Nigeria, the study opines that manifestations of failed political leadership, such as unemployment, poverty, mismanagement, social injustice, oppression etc., as seen in the plays are symptomatic of a lack of patriotism on the part of the leaders. The study opines that a change in the attitudes of the elites, which will see to the emergence of patriotic leadership is the panacea needed to maximize the nation's human and natural resources potentials towards a better society.

Keywords: reflections, attitudinal, re-orientation, patriotism, unpatriotic, dialogism, dire need, change

1. Introduction

In the words of Chinua Achebe:

"The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hall marks of true leadership." (1)

Achebe continues:

"The countless billions that a generous providence poured into our national coffers in the last ten years (1972-1982) would have been enough to launch this nation into the middle-rank of

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developed nations and transformed the lives of our poor and needy. But what have we done with it? Stolen and salted it away by people in power and their accomplices." (4)

Anyone who has been an observer of the Nigerian space must have come to a conclusion which is no different from Achebe's: the problem of this nation stems from the consistent and consecutive emergence of unpatriotic leaders. This very unfortunate phenomenon dates back to the very moment of independence as can be seen in the utterances of those who fought and secured independence for the nation.

James Booth quotes Nnamdi Azikwe as saying:

"...henceforth I shall utilize my earned income to secure my enjoyment of a high standard of living..." (49)

And Chief Obafemi Awolowo:

"I was going to make myself formidable intellectually, morally invulnerable, to make all the money that is possible for a man with my brains and brawn to make in Nigeria." (49)

Selfless and patriotic leaders do not nurse or voice such thoughts. These are the thoughts of self-seeking people.

Achebe avers that:

"Patriotism is possible only when the people who rule and those under their power have a common and genuine goal of maintaining the dispensation under which the nation lives. This will in turn, only happen if the nation is ruled justly, if the welfare of all the people rather than the advantage of the few become the corner-stone of public policy." (19)

On his part, Erasmus contends that *"a major challenge that appears to confront Africa and which cuts across the length and breadth of the continent is the challenge of irresponsible political leadership"* (150). Agaptus Nwuzor opines that *"there is virtually no country in sub-Saharan Africa that had not experienced its own phase of military and civilian autocratic regimes anchored on extreme personalization of the state"* (150). Nwuzor goes on to quote Aloysius Okolie who puts it even better when he concludes that Africa's underdevelopment is the consequence of having incompetent leaders who have low capacities to initiate development but have an unquenchable craving for power which is deployed to corrupt ends (150).

People in leadership positions, that is political leadership, are the ones who influence public policy and make decisions for the running of the society. Hope Egaga is of the opinion that *"political leadership refers to the ability of the people in administrative positions in a country to enunciate and implement positive and dynamic policies that would affect the lives of the citizens"* (10). Leadership means being the head of a group of people and showing a positive attitude towards the overall interest of the people.

Ngwube Arinze has done plenty of work on the subject of political leadership. In one of his works, Arinze cites J.M. Burns who sees leadership as a reciprocal process of mobilizing people and resources towards realizing societal goals (176). There is a difference between societal goals and personal goals. Arinze also cites G. Olusanya who contends that leadership, which is positive leadership, is about influencing people and institutions towards attaining goals which leads to the betterment and greater well-being of society (126). Olusanya as quoted in Arinze (176) insists that integrity is one of the qualities of a good leader.

For society to make progress, political leaders must deliver good governance. Good governance requires patriotism and selflessness from leaders. Patriotism and selflessness will produce leaders whose motivation is to make a positive difference in the lives of the people not to stuff their own bank accounts, acquire uncountable property and secure the highest enjoyment for themselves and family members.

Maryisabella Ada Eze posits that:

"Leadership can destroy or transform the prospects of a nation. Where the leadership is self-centered, intellectually bankrupt, morally and ethically bad, government policies, the economy and social life will be affected negatively". (157)

Clearly, the numerous socio-political and economic challenges that prevent the citizens from enjoying peace and justice are symptomatic of unpatriotic leadership. Achebe puts it this way:

"...Patriotism, being part of an unwritten social contract between a citizen and the state, cannot exist where the state reneges on the agreement. The state undertakes to organize society in such a way that the citizen can enjoy peace and justice..." (17)

It is clear that Achebe concludes that leaders have failed to live up to the promise of providing patriotic leadership which would in turn enable the citizens to enjoy peace and justice.

We have established two points upon which this essay is anchored. Firstly, any nation without patriotic and responsible leadership cannot make positive advancement and as a corollary, the citizens will suffer. Secondly, from independence to date, Nigeria has had the misfortune of unpatriotic and irresponsible leadership, except for the short-lived Muritala Mohammed regime; hence, the people undergo untold hardship.

From independence to date, Nigeria has remained a paradise for people in leadership position and their cronies while remaining hell on earth for the masses.

Commenting on the state of affairs in Nigeria, Nwuzor states:

"...the contemporary fragility of Nigeria...is rooted in, and a product of leadership crises that started shortly after independence. The deviation of the political leadership from the democratic

path and its embracement of authoritarianism paved the way for the various shades of revolutionary pressures that stymied the potential of the state". (163)

Concerning this sorry state of affairs in Nigeria, Emmanuel Obiechina believes that the elite have failed to justify and validate their claim to leadership (123). On his part, Bade Onimode posits that the indigenous bourgeoisie who mounted the leadership after independence only succeeded in transforming state power into a tool for the primitive acquisition of material wealth for themselves (62). The unpatriotic and irresponsible leadership foisted on the nation by the elite has led to poverty, unemployment, hunger, illiteracy, endemic diseases, oppression, crime and hopelessness. Ironically, those who have plunged the nation into this state, and who have pillaged and looted the country blind, describe the country as a great country. In response to this, Achebe says:

"Nigeria is not a great country. It is one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun. It is one of the most expensive countries and one of those that give least value for money. It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar. In short, it is one of the most unpleasant places on earth."
(11)

Using Chris Nwamuo's *The Prisoners* and *The Squeeze*, this study highlights the absence of patriotic, responsible leadership in Nigeria and thus, asserts that the nation is in dire need of patriotic leaders if it intends to move forward.

2. Theoretical framework

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is used in explicating the two texts under study. Available space does not support an elaborate discussion of the theory here. Its suitability to this study arises from the fact, in part, that it supports the social function of art. This view is affirmed by Emerson and Morson who assert that the Bakhtinian dialogic concept espouses creativity and ethical responsibility in art (27) (Qtd in Emezue). The dialogic concept of the carnivalesque is useful in this study. According to Okereke, this concept consists of "*interrogating, challenging and subverting*" authority "*in the discourse battleground.*" (21)

We view the literary text as an utterance whose meaning depends on the dialogue and/or intertextual relationship among text, author and reader. Okereke opines that "*for meaning to be expressed, it must be coded in utterance which is not only addressed to any other but also demands a response from the addressee.*" (20)

One of the key postulations of dialogism is the recognition of the other, the presence of the addressee irrespective of whether he is absent or the utterance is a monologue. This means that the meaning we make out of an utterance depends on the awareness of the presence of the other and the concept of answerability.

By adapting the dialogic position, we are able to analyze the plays by unraveling the extrinsic and intrinsic 'discourses' which act as point of convergence for the play, the

playwright and the reader. The extrinsic and intrinsic discourses correspond with the external and internal factors which bear upon the playwright and our own understanding of the plays. The extrinsic factors have to do with socio-economic issues of the playwright's ambience, such as corruption in its various shades, which are symptomatic of unpatriotic leadership. The intrinsic factors relate to the dramatist's use of language with a view to realizing his overall thematic concern. The Nigerian geo-political space is what it is because of the unpatriotic disposition of its political leadership. Dialogism is apt for this study because it provides the dramatist the opportunity to call for patriotism as a political ideology through his artistic vision.

3. Review of scholarship on Chris Nwamuo's *The Prisoners* and *The Squeeze*

This section examines selected existing scholarship on the dramaturgy of Chris Nwamuo. This includes issues of artistic vision, dramatic techniques, approach and language. The importance of this is to establish the critical gap which the current study intends to fill with regard to the drama of Chris Nwamuo and to show the relevance of the subject matter to the study of Nigerian drama in general.

According to Essien-Eyo in an article entitled "Theatre and Survivalist Philosophy in Nigeria: An Examination of *No More the Wasted Breed* and *The Squeeze*", "*the central theme in The Squeeze is disaster. That is, the destruction of lives brought about by economic and social deprivation. The economic crunch is squeezing the life out of the people*" (71). She goes further to explain that: "*The Squeeze is set in modern Nigeria with the events and experiences identifiable as Nigerian*" (70). Here, she locates the play within the purview of corrupt governance. Thus, it has been argued that bad governance and corruption are symptoms of institutional and leadership failure. In the blurb of the play, *The Squeeze*, the anonymous reviewer has this to say:

"The Squeeze is a disturbing play, an austere lament on the consequences of economic and social deprivations. It echoes the many subtle relationships usually buried beneath outraged headlines but which nevertheless, frame human actions. It is a play about ironies. With a strong and poetic language, it travels from facial settings through superficial atmospheric locales to ritualistic alters of wailing and lament." (Back cover).

Here the anonymous reviewer exposes the reader to the ironies embedded in the play. Available literature related to the subject matter under study has identified poor leadership, as a root cause of the socio-political problems in Nigeria. In his seminal essay entitled, "The writer and Ph(f)aces of conflict in Africa". Ademola Dasylya indicts both the military and the civilian leadership in Nigeria for creating socio-political problems in the society. Ademola takes a panoramic survey of the forms of leadership that characterize African nations since independence. Under military leadership in Nigeria for instance, he holds that "*the polity has witnessed the worst nature of violence and gross violation of fundamental human right*". To him, "*this is predictable because the military is an aberrant government*" (215). He goes further to state

that under civilian government, *"the country had hardly fared better. For instance, the country has witnessed the worst ethnic and religious violence, the agonies of the Niger Delta militant uprising, the Itsekiri-Ijaw genocidal war, Christian/Muslims religious crises among others. Ademola posits that "all these arise largely from institutionalized greed and lack of ideological focus and genuine commitment on the part of Nigeria's leadership" (27).*

Imo Eshiet in an essay entitled *"Beyond the Ritual Archetype: Chris Nwamuo and the Search for New Idioms in Nigerian Drama"* remarks thus, *"the publication in 1989 of The Squeeze not only shows a sophisticated sense of artistic sensitivity and political timing but also concretizes as rigorously disturbing, analysis of the broad failing in economic and political policies, a brilliant water-and-sewage plan for a land in the midst of fire"* (36). Eshiet hits the nail on its head when he further asserts that *"the peculiar quality of this play stems from the playwright's gifted ability to penetrate with lucidity, eloquence and lethal wit, into the heart of the socio-economic condition of his settings"* (36). Eshiet sees the playwright as one who understands his society, and tries to recreate things around him in a creative manner. In *"Masculinity, Economic Productivity and Social Stratification in Chris Nwamuo's The Squeeze"*. Esekong avers that *"the play captures the ripple effect of Nigeria's failing political, social and economic systems zooming in on the sad experiences of a family"*. He goes further to state that *"the matrices of the political and economic systems drive the citizenry at the nuclear family level into precarious situations and cause them to react in ways that alter existing social balances"* (129). Esekong holds that Nwamuo in *The Squeeze* lampoons mismanagement by the political elite at the expense of the masses. Ubong Nda in an essay, *"A Socio-Political Reading of Chris Nwamuo's The Squeeze"* argues that Nwamuo *"effectively highlights some critical Nigerian social problems some of which are unemployment, social discrimination and corruption in national life, etc."* (226). We can, therefore, state that Nwamuo's dramaturgy expresses the feelings of a creative mind and a conscience sensitive to the plight of the underprivileged in the society which is caused by ineffective leadership. Effumbe Kachua is thus right when he asserts that *"the title of the play is a metaphor for the famished citizens whose lives have been rendered hopeless by an irresponsible leadership and system"* (37). He goes further to describe Nigerian leaders as *"the unfortunate guardians who have dried stock and squeezed our lives out of us"* (37). This is a system of leadership that promotes unpopular policies that cause retrenchment, unemployment, armed robbery and other social vices.

On his part, Edet Essien argues that *"The Squeeze is quint-essential in this regard, for it mirrors the economic woes and attendant effects on the Nigerian citizenry which still continue"* (107). He goes further to state that *"the work succinctly captures the menace of mismanagement and resultant wreckage on the nuclear family and the society at large"* (17). Implicitly, the absence of purposeful and credible leadership committed to solving the problems of the common man in our society is the cause of what is stated above.

James Okpiliya, in his contribution underscores the effects of poor performance and failed leadership. In an essay entitled *"War Literature as Metaphor for a Failing State in Chris Nwamuo's The Prisoners"*, he points out that the problems reflected in *The Prisoners* such as *"maladministration embezzlement, corruption, diversion of resources meant for the masses have trailed our national unity"* (114). Reuben Abati also believes that Nwamuo's thematic thrust in the play transcends the obvious confrontation between prisoners and their oppressors. As

shown in the play's choice of imagery and its epilogue, it is a caustic song of protest, a fervent cry of change and a desperate call to the oppressed class of our society to discard the toga of a slave (7).

Okpiliya further states that "*Nwamuo's satire against corruption in failing states has no overt indignation. It is barbed with irony. His targets include public thieves in the character of the PS and the methods used by them to divert and appropriate public resources to private use*" (114). Eshiet in "Drama and nation Building" also comments that "*the play signals its institutional relevance from the preliminary stage direction by invoking a situation of struggle. The fight for liberation, the crux of the issue at stake, is shortchanged by poor planning and motivation, all of which parallel the larger society*" (82). Nwamuo dramatizes the yearning for change and leadership reorientation.

Ameh Akoh and Charles Adora in "Humanizing the Dehumanised: Collective Pedagogy in Nwamuo's *The Prisoners*" are of the opinion that "*the play demonstrates the fact that dramatic art is a tool for change because it sensitizes the individual on the conditions in the society, promotes new ideas, points to a new way of life, of change and progressive development*" (60). In "Oppression and Justice as Social Monsters: Chris Nwamuo's Antidote in *The Prisoners*" Uwemedimo Atakpo and Sunday Umanah assert: Chris Nwamuo in *The Prisoners* has attempted what Osofisan and Nasiru have postulated and even more, which has added this idea of boldness on the part of the playwright in telling the truth no matter what he may face (53). Continuing, Atakpo and Umanah add that "*for a dramatist or playwright to carry out this sacred duty effectively, he/she must be courageous, bold not evasive, knowledgeable and very willing to present issues in their right perspectives*" (75). We can therefore borrow the words of Musa and Anyagu to say that Chris Nwamuo writes for the oppressed and has filled the gap for a theatre that could confront the status quo and unmask their selfish dealings with the ruled (33).

4. Echoes of unpatriotic leadership in *The Prisoners* and *The Squeeze*: the need for attitudinal change

Nwamuo's dramaturgy is a weapon of collective struggle and also an instrument of demolishing the squalid institutions that exploit and degrade humanity. His art resists and challenges unpatriotic regimes. In their appreciation of Nwamuo's dramaturgy, Ameh Akoh and Charles Adora aver that "*as a dramatist Nwamuo believes in the potentiality of the arts, particularly, theatrical arts to entertain agitate the mind, influence attitudinal change and meaningful development in any society. This trend streams through his plays namely *The Prisoners*, *The Squeeze*, *The Substitute*, *The Wisdom of the King*, *Save Our Lives* and *The Last Song*. Unequivocally, it is his appreciation of dramatic arts and theatrical forms as a reliable humanistic advocate that informs Nwamuo's dramaturgy*" (58). Nwamuo believes in the use of art in criticizing the status quo in order to better the living conditions of the masses.

To understanding Nwamuo's dramaturgy, the reader has to be critically equipped with the polemics raised by Aristotle in *The Poetics*, where the later points out that all literature involves mimesis, an imitation or representation of real or imaginary objects and

situations; of men doing and experiencing something (Qtd in Kachua). Kachua, corroborating Aristotle, avers that

"Nwamuo's drama is a representation of men and their foibles and inactions in realistic situations. He presents this in diverse forms and themes. He presents man as a caricature of established phenomena through the use of ironies...Chris Nwamuo is a notable artiste who has used dramatic medium to present contemporary Nigerian society. As a profoundly informed dramatist, he feels incensed and disgusted at the callous betrayal of national ideals by the emergent national leadership after attainment of political independence. The upsurge of such social malaise as naked banditry, stealing, official corruption, administrative ineptitude and flagrant mockery of liberal democratic principles has instigated Nwamuo to produce sharp and caustic plays that satirize the management of state apparatus from an essentially humanistic position." (14)

One distinguished creative pre-occupation of Nwamuo's dramaturgy is his reformatory impulse. Nwamuo's dramaturgy dialogizes the socio-economic problems of man in his society. He probes the continuous perpetration of evil in the society and the suffering of the masses occasioned by flagrant abuse of power by unpatriotic political leaders who are good at pursuing their personal goals. They are greedy, selfish, myopic and shameless opportunists whose moral laxity is exhibited in their actions.

In *The Prisoners*, Nwamuo presents characters with strong will and determination that are desirous to take their destiny by themselves. They are bent on challenging the oppressive and suppressive system of the unpatriotic prison authority. The climax of the play is when the prisoners stage a war to topple the unpatriotic prison authority.

Nwamuo through his artistic creation of characters, uses his dramaturgy to call for the much needed change in the society. This is evidenced in the final upstage of the oppressive and dictatorial regime of the prison authority by the prisoners. The duo of Akoh and Adora submit thus about the play *The Prisoners*: *"the play therefore demonstrates the fact that dramatic art is a tool for change because it sensitizes the individual on the conditions in the society and promotes new ideas, and points to a new way of life, change and progressive development"* (60). It is important to note here that the change experienced in the play would not have been possible if the prisoners (the oppressed) had folded their arms, waiting for divine intervention. But in this case, they decided to take their destinies by themselves. Hence, positive change can only be achieved when all are ready and determined to make it effective. This re-echoes Frantz Fanon's revolutionary position in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

"To educate the people politically does not mean, cannot mean, making a political speech. What it means is to try, relentlessly and passionately to teach the masses that everything depends on them; that if we stagnate, it is their responsibility and that if we go forward it is due to them too, that there is no famous man who will take responsibility for everything but that the demiurge is the people themselves and the magic hands are finally only the hands of the people." (159)

Using the medium of drama, Nwamuo has significantly shown and demonstrated that art is capable of righting the wrongs in the society.

5. Unemployment and Poverty

The story of *The Squeeze* is about Okoro, a graduate of Civil Engineering who could not secure a job some years after graduation from the University. This exposes the reader to the plight of thousands of young Nigerian graduates who are roaming the streets in search of unavailable jobs. His wife, Julie, an expectant mother, also a graduate of History from a British University is equally jobless. In her anguish, she laments the situation thus:

Julie: You are quite right. But a man has to face realities too. You have no job. Your parents cannot help. Your brother is unemployed. You have no Godfather (pause). Our only source of salvation is my parents. And you are saying 'No' because you are a man. No Okay. You must think of the baby. Someone must provide for it.

Okoro: (BEATEN TO IT). I am sorry. Do as you wish. It's just that it is humiliating to depend on others for everything three years after an honours degree in Engineering.

Julie: (CONSOLING). Easy okay. Things weren't always like this. I would never have imagined that a graduate of History from British University would be without a job two years after graduation. Things can't go on like this. Remember change is the only permanent act of life. You must have hope." (4-5)

Consequently, both are forced to depend solely on the magnanimity of Julie's father and mother, an idea which Okoro dislikes. The unfortunate fact remains that Okoro's family cannot take care of itself let alone giving them some kind of assistance.

Going by a dialogic analysis of Nwamuo's *The Squeeze* and the workings of dialogic discourse, the text, according to Eshiet "is a point of intersection, a labyrinth of voices where neither words nor ideas exist independently but in a dialogue with other words and consciousness" (30). Accordingly, V.N. Voloshinov, a Bakhtinian scholar emphasizes:

"Not a single instance of verbal utterance can be reckoned exclusively to its utterer's account. Every utterance is the product of an interaction between speaker and the broader context of the whole complex social situation in which the utterance emerges." (79)

Okoro continues:

"Okoro: What hope is there for this country when every day brings in more news of a bleak future? Austerity? Structural Adjustment: Rationalization. Tighten their belts, they are fainting everyday... what hope is there for any civil servant in the country. Government says it can no longer employ nor guarantee security for existing jobs. What does it expect people to do....steal?

Julie: Easy okay. I strongly believe that after the structural adjustment programme with its varying degrees of unemployment, rationalization and retrenchment, things will ease off. There will be employment opportunities again.

Okoro: By then Julie, half the people would have died. Families would have been wiped off. Have you ever see anything improve in this country? I have my doubts. There simply is no hope."

From the foregoing dialogue between Okoro and Julie, the interlocutory relationship that exists between them reveals to us the Bakhtinian concept of multivocality in textual study. Voloshinov in this perspective asserts: "every utterance is the product of an interaction between speakers and broader context of the whole complex social situation in which the utterance emerges" (79). Here, the broader context of the social complex situation is the despondent and disconsolate condition prevalent in the play. "The Squeeze presents a ritualistic altar of wailing and lament by the masses whose future is bound in chains due to a bizarre economic and political system which is heartless" (Kachua: 38). Nwamuo rejects any leadership system that causes stress and panic to its people especially the youths. According to Kachua, "graduate unemployment of course, represents a nation's greatest loss of its most vital and optimal productive potential" (40).

Unemployment is thus a crucial thematic issue that stands out as a social paradox in *The Squeeze*. Nwamuo focuses attention on unemployment as a social problem and as a yardstick for retardation of the Nigerian society. Unemployment is a social evil which rises when able-bodied persons cannot get employed, though qualified and willing to work. The consequences of unemployment in *The Squeeze* rest on Okoro, the play's protagonist who has no job after graduation as an engineer. The dehumanizing effect of unemployment results to poverty, dependency on parents and other relations for their needs. The story of Okoro is a gory tale of unemployment which makes him a psychological wreck and places him in a depressing and dehumanizing condition. Okoro's predicament is a shared suffering for his fellow unemployed lots and other countrymen who share the same fate and bizarre experience. Okoro is a metaphor singled out by the playwright as a representative of the squeezed and bamboozled citizens of the country.

As a result, Okoro is evicted from his apartment for his inability to pay his piles of rent. This is evidence in the play:

"Chief: Mr. Okoro (Silence) Mr. Okoro! (NO ANSWER). Runaway Husband! (SILENCE). Honourable poor man! (NO ANSWER. HE LOOKS AT HIS WATCH AND SHAKES HIS HEAD) Alright. Let him go anywhere he likes, I go wait here collect my money. Even if it takes the whole night. (SITS DOWN ON THE CHAIR). Enough is enough. For nine months I come here to collect my rent. Each time there is excuse, excuse. Will I eat excuse? (PAUSE). If not for im wife (SWEARS, PAUSE) Now e see me, disappear. (29). Coward! Because of me he abandon im wife and pick race. No worry. Today na the last. Whatever happens to him today, I am responsible. All I want na my money. (LIGHTS HIMSELF A CIGARETTE. HE IS

SMOKING AND THINKING WHEN THE WARDROBE DOOR OPENS. OKORO EMERGES CHIEF IS STARTLED). (30)

Okoro: Chief, I am sorry. I didn't mean to annoy you. I was trying to avoid an ugly scene.

After much pleading with Chief Arinze for more weeks to pay his rent, chief finally evicts him.

Chief: (BLOWS A WHISTLE AS OKORO TALKS). You think say you fit talk to me anyhow? (TWO HEAVILY BUILT FEROCIOUS LOOKING BOUNCERS STAGGER IN AND TAKE A HARD LOOK AT OKORO. HE IS SCARED STIFF). now my rent in 5 minutes or I order them. (OKORO LOOKS AT THEM, PICKS HIS BRIEFCASE, THROWS IN A FEW CLOTHES AND CLOSES IT).

Okoro: (LOOKS INTO CHIEF'S FACE AND CHIEF INTO HIS). I'll leave. It is not your fault. (PAUSE). You will have no cause to use them. But for the system where would I meet rogues like you.

Chief: Smell out with your yanga toro-toro. Them tell you make you put pride for pocket to go find job, you de make actiong big-man (OKORO LOOKS AT HIM SPITEFULLY CHIEF ORDERS HIS MEN). Show him out. (OKORO MAKES A SHOW OF RESISTANCE BUT HE IS OVER-POWERED. THEY GRAB HIM AND THE SUITCASE AND EXIT)."

Chris Nwamuo has shown in *The Squeeze* how poverty, the resultant effect of unemployment, and caused by endemic political leadership myopia has necessitated the eviction of Okoro from his apartment by no other person than an illiterate landlord, Chief Praise God Arinze who works as a political thug, acting for his master-in-power in return for political remunerations. This regrettable contradiction of life's expectations and social realities are satires, mocking the connivance of local collaborators and alliances of failed political leadership.

6. Social injustice and social exclusion

In the play, *The Squeeze*, the playwright captures situations where unfair practices hold sway. The social deprivations arising from the forced retrenchment from existing labour positions is one of the cardinal focus and social stigma highlighted by Nwamuo in *The Squeeze*. The story of Ulohu's retrenchment is an ironic twist. This contrasting irony becomes a glaring raising of eyebrow to the extent that while some people are laid-off from work like Ulohu, those highly-placed in the society employ their close relatives. This social stigma amounts to nepotism or man-know-man syndrome. The solutions would not have been retrenchment, but good management of the economy. This is dramatized in *The Squeeze* thus:

"**G.M:** (BEGINNING HIS DICTATION). Gentlemen, it has come to the notice of Management that some of you do not understand our position in the current retrenchment exercise which is sweeping through the corridors of this nation. As such you have failed to present the picture properly before your fellow workers in this company. It is for this

reason I have decided to brief you. Retrenchment is a government directive which has come as a result of IMF loan. (The Squeeze, 64)

G.M: (CONTINUING) *Under this programme, government has directed as follows: (a) that the current work force must be reduced by half (b) that an embargo has been placed on any form of employment (c) that there will be no wage increase until further notice (d) that maintenance culture has been introduced." (The Squeeze, 65).*

However, the same General Manager of Industrial Plastic Company who gave out these instructions employs his secretary's brother:

Eka: *Thank you very much for my brother's appointment paper.*

G.M: *Don't worry about it. We will help as much as we can (PAUSE). When does he start work?*

Eka: *Monday next week Sir.*

G.M: *Good. Let us see him after his orientation programme." (The Squeeze, 63)*

The action of the G.M (genral manager) is typical of the government which Essien sees as retrenching the less privileged while at the same time employing favoured applicants (102). The anomaly which Lazurus (G.M) exhibits portrays the actual happenings in the socio-economic and political lives of the people of Nigeria. Nwamuo, in *The Squeeze* draws the society's attention to how the leadership has failed the people by enthroning social injustice and indiscriminate removal of her citizens from work without just cause and adequate planning for rehabilitation through good pension scheme for those on retirement. The machinery of leadership in the play lacks care for its citizens.

Effumbe Kachua, writing in *The Socio-political Perspective in Nwamuo's Drama* under the subtitle of "The Social Diary of the Playwright" has the following to say:

"The critical indices that measure and determine functional and credible social system of a country are the educational, health and security standards. These primary indices impact directly on the citizens' socio-economic and cultural well-being and overly influence their sense and degree of patriotism, love and service to the nation." (60)

Effumbe's statement points to the compass of credible and efficient leadership in a society that is people and conscience oriented in its leadership role. The reverse is the norm in Nwamuo's *The Squeeze*. The total neglect by the leaders of the ugly plight of the teaming masses becomes a pitiful situation in the society. This neglect gives rise to the apathy and lack of enthusiasm Nigerians feel when the issue of patriotism comes to play in the agenda of national affairs. If patriotism primarily means love for one's country, how would one love his country when there is no sense of belonging in terms of provision of basic infrastructure that make life meaningful and comfortable for the common man? The absence of primary health-care, educational institutions and facilities, employment opportunities, good access roads, pipe-borne water supply and much more tell the story.

Thus, Nwamuo artistically uses materials from his society to call for change. *The Squeeze* skillfully presents Nigeria's socio-economic policies and their failure to create an egalitarian society. This explains why Emerson and Morson observe that the theory of dialogism advances the social responsibility of literature. For them, the dialogic concept could be extended to the idea of "creativity and ethical responsibility" in art (6). Therefore, dialogism promotes the social function of literature.

The concept of social exclusion, also known as marginalization is a process in which individuals or entire communities of people are systematically denied their rights, opportunities and resources like housing, employment, healthcare, civic engagement, democratic participation and due process. Marginalization is a process of relegating specific groups of people to the lower or outer edge of the society. It effectively pushes groups of people to the margin of the society economically, politically, culturally and socially following the policy of exclusion. This denies a section of the society equal access to productive resources and avenues for the realization of their productive human potentials and opportunities for their full capacity utilization. This is the height of unpatriotic acts by the leaders.

What Nwamuo presents in *The Squeeze* is the failure of paralytic, epileptic and unpatriotic leadership to attend to the plight of the people who are socially excluded from basic amenities of life. This neglect has a telling effect on rural-urban migration which in turn congests the already crowded cities thereby causing unemployment – a major thematic preoccupation in the play. The playwright presents the situation in a dialogue between Okoro and Emeka thus:

Okoro: Do these frogs carry on like this all night

Emeka: I am afraid so.

Okoro: Why can't you get rid of them?

Emeka: Apparently, the Ministry of Rural Development has not done its job.

Okoro: That's a silly answer. The Rural Development Ministry only exists on paper. They are only good at sharing the tax payer's money and muffling of opinions. They are useless..." (45-6)

The above dialogue by the two brother's right in their village reveals succinctly the social exclusion being faced by the rural dwellers. This pushes the people in the rural areas into poverty, misery, low wage, discrimination and low livelihood and insecurity. As a consequence, the economically political is and culturally deprived vast chunk of the population has emerged to be socially ignorant, illiterate, uneducated and dependent. The playwright, through *The Squeeze* advances that if attention is shifted to the rural areas in the provision of infrastructural facilities, the tension in the cities would be reduced.

7. Oppression and brutality

In *The Prisoners*, Nwamuo exposes and presents leadership that is oppressive and brutal in its dealings with the people. The disposition of the Superintendent of the Prison exemplifies the

dictatorial and self-centeredness of certain African leaders like late General Abacha of Nigeria, Charles Taylor of Liberia, Emperor Bokassa of Central African Republic and late Idi Amin of Uganda. The superintendent confiscates the food supplied for the upkeep of the prisoners for his personal benefit - he sells some, gives some as largess to his girlfriend, some are sent to his family, while the prisoners starve and yet are goaded to hard labour under the scorching heat of the tropical sun (Effumbe, 49). The dialogue between the prisoners reveals more:

“Obi: Yes, I think it’s better to die of bullets in the front than of hunger in the rear. I mean how can one face the wrath of God on judgment day, knowing he died of mere hunger? Come to think of it. How can a common Corporal make us - four hefty-men - work around his house for almost a whole week without food, without water. It is indeed better to die?”

Buchi: But does he have any food?

Obi: Nonsense! The whole goddam store is filled to the brim with assorted relief materials. From both the charitable organizations and the food Directorate. He and his other colleagues are simply growing fat without thinking of others. He needs to be taught a lesson about the war one of these days. He just has to be taught a lesson.

Onwu: (Anxiously) what baffles me is why the Superintendent, Sergeant and the Corporal should deny us food at all, when the store is filled up with stock fish, yam, rice, beans, garri, formular two, garri garbon, powdered milk and various other food stuff. I hear that as a detachment we are entitled to great quality of food items, but see what...

Obi: (Emphatically) That’s right!...come to think of it. What has been happening to all the stuff? I tell you... we are fighting against ourselves in this war, not the enemy. I tell you...we are the ones killing ourselves.” (The Prisoners 5-6)

Leadership, however we view it, entails responsibility. Responsible leadership means accountability and faithful stewardship to the people. A leadership that shirks its responsibility to its people would foster wreckage on the people. Leadership in Nwamuo’s *The Prisoners* is bedeviled by oppression and brutality. The environment in which the play is enacted centers on an unjust society which is governed and operated through oppression, deprivation and injustice of the worst order on the people as represented by the plight Mezie, Obi, Buchi and Onwu (the prisoners). The people are indeed prisoners in their country.

The playwright likens the Nigerian society to the prison where the poor are the prisoners and the leaders steal from the nation’s treasury to satisfy themselves while the masses are allowed to live in penury. The playwright portrays the leaders as selfish, greedy and wicked towards the people they govern. The PS would rather feed his dogs with milk than feed the prisoners. The desire to fight back the malaise of leadership remains central in *The Prisoners*. The contradictions which have led to conflict could best be demonstrated in the dialogue between Stella and her boyfriend, the Prison Superintendent thus:

“Stella: Darling these men are really hungry. Couldn’t you help them with little food. I feel for them. The way they were eating from those plates.

PS: *Don't mind those foolish prisoners. They can die. If they like. The more they die the more food we will have for ourselves and for my business. After all I didn't ask them to run away from the war front or steal or rape women.*

Stella: *But a little food will do. Even the dogs' ration is enough (PAUSE) don't you think those prisoners are more important than the dogs?*

PS: *(Getting up and walking away from Stella). Those dogs are more precious to me than those outside there (pointing to the direction of the prisoners). They protect the prisons premises and officers. But I don't see what concerns you in this matter. As long as you get your due pay for services rendered, you should be alright! Or you want to look some other place for "employment"? Do you want to lose your ration, and allowance? (The Prisoners: 30).*

Stella: *(Hurriedly) No darling. No, I am really very sorry. You can give them Nnedu's ration I don't care. I only thought I should inform you that they are outside. (Walks back to the chair). (The Prisoners: 30)*

The Prisoners captures the struggles of the masses against exploitation by the ruling class. In the play, Stella, who seems to have some kind of humane personality is handicapped in her sympathy for the prison inmates because it could jeopardize her own "stomach infrastructure" which would result in her ration of food supply being cut off by the PS. (Prison Superintendent) who is strongly against her sympathetic stance towards the prisoners. Reacting to this kind of predicament, Atakpo and Umanah assert thus: "It is the height of man's inhumanity to man when dogs become more precious than people. This does not only portray the wicked mind of P.S. but relates with Nigerian social practices where the rich continue in consumption while the poor work and starve. This shows that the oppressor believes he is the only one that has the right to exist, and if the oppressed must exist, it is only because the existence of the oppressed is necessary to their existence" (78). Okpiliya further enunciates thus: "Nwamuo presents a useful commentary on the role of leadership in developing nations and pursues the theme of corrupt leadership and the general atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion. He dramatizes the plight of the exploited ordinary citizens, the total despair of the common man and the large scale suffering of refugees symbolized in the four principal characters: Mezie, Obi, Buchi and Onwu" (111).

8. Conclusion

This essay examines the problem of political leadership and concludes that the crucial missing ingredient is patriotism. The introduction presents a background picture of political leadership in the Nigerian geo-political space and establishes the relationship between politics and art. This is followed by a review of scholarship on Chris Nwamuo's dramaturgy with a view to showing what has been said by various scholars and to identify the gaps which this study hopes to fill. Our review of scholarship on the dramaturgy of Chris Nwamuo shows that his plays have received enormous attention from scholars. Almost all of them assert that Nwamuo is a dramatist with a social vision. They opine that his plays interrogate the problem of political leadership in Nigeria. In the process, various factors have

been deduced as the reasons for failed political leadership and as a corollary various solutions recommended even as suggested by the dramatist.

This study agrees with the views and opinions expressed in the scholarship that are reviewed here. It, however, recommends that because everything rises or falls based on the quality of political leadership in the society, further research needs to be conducted on the subject of failed political leadership. The hope of the common man and the progress of society are dependent upon this. Therefore, the issue is weighty enough such that its solution would require more studies than what we have at present.

On our part, using the dialogic theory of literature in interrogating and challenging the apparent ineptitude of the political leadership as presented by Chris Nwamuo in his plays we have come to the conclusion that the crucial missing ingredient in the political leaders is patriotism. The problem of unemployment with its attendant consequences, poverty, thuggery, man's inhumanity to man, social injustice, oppression, mismanagement, etc., will be greatly mitigated if not eradicated once the members of the leadership class are patriotic.

As a corollary, therefore, this study avers that in the plays understudy, the playwright is calling for leadership attitudinal re-orientation. The present attitudes of greed, selfishness, self-centeredness are symptomatic of gross lack of patriotism. The plays are a call for attitudinal change.

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