

DRAMATURGICAL ART AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY: BOLE BUTAKE'S *The Rape of Michelle*; NOTES & QUERIES

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Bole Butake's *The Rape of Michelle*¹ would, as we indicated above, be described in Brechtian terms as bourgeois theatre method. The playwright uses this device as his major technique in character portraiture. M. H. Abrams throws light on this method in the following terms.

In showing (also called "the dramatic method"), the author merely present his characters talking and acting and leaves the reader to infer what motives and dispositions lie behind what they do and say.²

Pitted against the phalanx of corruption in their society, Teacher Mikindong knows that he has no chance of obtaining justice or equity before the law and thus seeks the legal expertise of the prominent defense counsel, Zende, through the intercession of his wife. Yet Mikindong is portrayed as one who is not often prudent and even sometimes downright, naïve.

Although the hero is aware that both mother and daughter seek his amorous advances, yet he frequents Rufina's chicken parlour where mothers and their daughters will fight over you and throw you into jail".³ He is therefore unable to place his experiences in a context of significance in which every act has its consequences.

Mikindong not only tarnishes his reputation in the process by carrying with him the scandal of raping "a mere child" but also loses substantial "envelopes" in what turns out to be a labyrinthine and wholly corrupt legal process. His fear of scandal and imprisonment is therefore a powerful spectre that looms so large in his sub-conscious, sometimes driving him into irresponsible and thoughtless acts of appeasement (such as when he virtually blackmails his wife, Akwen and his Defense Counsel to offer "envelopes" to the Policeman who is holding him in custody.

Set in a period of social disruption, one of the interesting questions about character and ironic vision is the dramatic function of Mikindong. Is he alienated from society because he is repulsed by the corruption around him? Or, does he exist merely as a character of thought, an instrument or vehicle of comprehending the issues and ideas that concern Butake in his play?

FALSE ROAD TO THE EGALITARIAN SOCIETY

The attempt by the playwright to adapt the stylistic level and type of diction to the mode and status of his characters has prompted the choice of satire. The primary mode of dramatic exploration as a corrective of human folly and vice in *The Rape of Michelle* is Horatian as distinguished from Juvenilian satire. Abrams defines Horatian satire in the following, succinct manner:

...the character of the speaker is that of an urbane, witty and tolerant man of the world, who is moved more often to wry amusement than to indignation at the spectacle of human folly, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy,

and who uses a relaxed and formal language to evoke a smile at human folly and absurdities, sometimes including his own.⁴

Butake's play is an exploration of the post-independence trauma at both the social and individual levels. Irony and satire have been used to indict the Cameroonian situation. The central character, Mikindong does not show any sense of rejection of the community and its values. He allows himself to be led to a tragic-comic end without resistance.

Since, Mikindong takes a long time to gain a perspective that would enable him make value judgements he allows the corruption in post-independence bourgeois society to overwhelm him totally. Satire is directed against Mikindong and his middle-class friends (Eno and Ngegne) and by extension against all those impotent, African intellectuals who allow themselves to be used as tools or props to the status quo. Although Mikindong is not totally naïve; but we can never gauge the level of his consciousness nor are we sure about the range of his knowledge.

Mikindong only recently married to his strikingly beautiful wife is humiliated and framed for a crime he has not really committed as he would later confess to Barrister Zende.⁵ And, although his wife shows sufficient concern about her husband's condition when she pays him a visit in police custody-knowing too well- the nature of society – she is largely convinced that her husband raped their neighbour's "child".

Mikindong would later extract an oath from her that she would not join the Policeman in torturing him. She will try and see the trial Magistrate since she cannot afford to lose a husband after such a brief period of marriage. Zende, who has mastered human beings confirms that he had thought the hero was lying until he got his word that he had not raped Michelle. To which Akwen says that she had thought her husband "has done it"⁶, but now she "is absolutely proud of you"⁷.

The qualities that are lacking in the hero demonstrate that he has no convincing sense of self and he has no group identity. He is thus deluded into the belief that through bribes he can achieve his goals. Mikindong, like his friends Eno and Ngegne do not understand their roles as intellectuals within the social group as a whole. Thus the ironic denouement of *The Rape of Michelle* that he pays for a rape he did not commit through bribes.

EXPLOITATION WE SUFFER WILL NEVER ABATE

Mikindong and his friends seem to accept their pseudo-assimilation into the ruling oligarchy through the power of "envelopes" and "telephone calls". They remain merely at the periphery of power and even then as despised members who could be thrown into police custody by the Police Commissioner and Prosecutor Traisel. They do not possess any highly exceptional endowments and

are devoid of any heroism. In spite of the school teacher's apparent modesty, the dramatist does not hold him up as an example of emulation.

Almost like the modernist egoist, Mikindong is trapped in his own knowledge and understanding of reality. When Zende intimates him while in police custody of the full implications of rape against a minor since a maximum sentence would be demanded, Mikindong reminds him that the girls mother is effecting her revenge against him because he had in the past repulsed her amorous advances. And, when the lawyer tells his client that such evidence would not hold in court; Mikindong replies that the Cameroonian "law is what it is because many innocent people get convicted while criminals go scot-free"⁸. Moreso, Zende, should know that "the presiding Magistrate would like an envelope"⁹.

Butake's attitude towards Mikindong and the other characters in his play remains one of ambiguity. Using satire as his major technique with its accompanying devices of irony and sarcasm, hyperbole etc he allows his audience to perceive the satirical pivot of *The Rape of Michelle*. The hero being only too aware of his ineffectiveness, prefers withdrawal rather than action. He does not seem to have any sense of direction that would lead him to any recognisable mode of action.

Mikindong seems to be almost proud of his passiveness and collusion because of his absurd belief in the nothingness of *la condition humaine*.

The hero shows a keen understanding of his society and this often gives way to impotence and defeat. From such a perspective of society then, Mikindong considers the Cameroonian courts as merely a show-case. The possibility of regeneration therefore remains muted since society is too far gone on the irreversible plunge towards decay and putrescence. There is the gnawing fear that should he be thrown in jail, he stands to lose not only his job but; his wife, who "will become the woman of some powerful man"¹⁰.

He does not therefore show any conviction that post-colonial society can be redeemed. We see this clearly in his relationship with the Policemen the very archetypal figure of societal putrefaction. One of the ruses that this roguish character has perfected is his strategy of being deliberately impatient with the detainee's visitors. By also constantly reminding them of the gravity of Mikindong's crime he extracts money for himself.

Mikindong would tell his wife that when she is bringing "the things in the evening...give those boys out there a good bribe"¹¹. Even Zende tells the Policeman that teacher Mikindong "will never forget you"¹². The naivety of Mikindong is brought to the fore when he compliments the Policeman for being "very kind people"¹³. The lawyer tells him that they usually are "When they want to"¹⁴.

Reminiscent of Soyinka's Particulars Joe in *The Road*,¹⁵ Butake's Policeman is the embodiment of the oppressive structures which function in a world of fear and uncertainty. He sees

the entrenched economic interests as firm and unchangeable. As the victimizer his police cell becomes the singular prototype of the neo-colonial totalitarian regime. His is a world of annihilation. It is therefore not difficult to see how these images become permanently etched in Mikindong's psyche.

Armed with guile and master of deformed wit he knows Mikindong is a contrast to those "packed ... fifty in a cell... like sardines". Thus he deliberately places him in a cell with "a wet floor", with barest clothing and with "feet unshod" in preparation for Akwen's visit. The latter immediately falls prey to this satanic ruse: "her features soften and she becomes anxious for his sake."¹⁶

Thus one of the most fully realised characters in Butake's satire is Policeman often pompously referred to by those with him on the beat as "Brigadier". Down-to-earth, cynical and wholly knowledgeable in the foundations of post-colonial society he has developed what he tags "Practical Philosophy" to cope with contemporary reality. Through him the putrid society is given a sharp focus.

When Mikindong inquires from him where he is to get the money that would bring him out of custody now that he has not even obtained bail; he is forthright in his answer: "...you are lucky that you have a beautiful wife. She will get the money for you."¹⁷

Full of his own self-importance he reprimands Rufina for being constantly in the Commissioner's office when the real police work is done by people like him. He thereby stoutly defends members of his profession not failing to remark that they are not ogres that society makes them out to be, yet they must; "eat": "don't mind lies people tell about the police we are not beasts but human beings. But we must eat".¹⁸

Mikindong tells Akwen "to give the man something, some money for a beer."¹⁹ They are four of them on duty he says and what she has offered is not enough for even "a bottle of red wine"²⁰ and besides her husband's treatment in police custody would depend on her. The Policeman knows that it does not really matter whether Mikindong has raped Michelle or not; the callous nature of contemporary reality makes that point irrelevant. If Mikindong does not make "contacts" he is bound to spend a good part of his life in prison thereby losing his wife and job. This point is driven home when he insinuates what will become of Mikindong's strikingly beautiful wife.²¹

The Policeman admits that he is being practical and realistic. He therefore derides Mikindong's notion of innocence. Cameroonian society revolves on "contacts" and money since the entire judicial system is a farce. But, as we will soon illustrate he is also both the object of irony and satire in *The Rape of Michelle*.

With his associations of the police cell and permanent confinement, which becomes the dramatist's singular prototype of neo-colonial despotic rule, it is his function to make the victim see

truth as illusory within the context that denies the deprived the opportunity to express his essential human qualities. Since, his highly subjective view of post-colonial Osse society is deliberately limited; for him nothing has changed or, will ever change. His is therefore a static, changeless view of the historical process:

nobody eats truth. But people need a drink now and again to do things. That is what I call practical Philosophy.²²

His warped logic only confirms this view of negation and social fragmentation. His “Practical Philosophy” of “a drink now and again” and “telephone calls from above” is euphemism for the gateway of the oppressed towards total destruction.

It is in his very nature to perfect and exalt the psychology of intimidation. Mikindong is made aware of his vulnerability through police custody. It is in the nature of bourgeois society that the innocent and guilty are presented with the mask of the oppressor in its worst form. For example, Mikindong, does not know what will befall him. Thus we see the detained man imploring his wife, Akwen not to join the Policeman in torturing him.

As instruments of arresting the revolutionary process in the society, the policeman is the epitome of the blank and insensitive character of bourgeois oligarchy. Butake’s Policeman therefore stands in the way of the people developing what Lucien Goldmann refers to as “a world vision”. He prefers the static nature of the historical moment in which the Osse community would become vitiated and in the process make no attempts to transcend its sense of vulnerability. He is therefore the very anti-thesis of Group Consciousness/identity which, according to Goldmann, is a product of

...a collective group consciousness which reaches its highest expression in the mind of a poet or a thinker²³

CONCLUSION

The Policeman’s role in *The Rape of Michelle* at a deeper level, is to smother the contradictions and conflicts of entrenched economic interests and the new awakening in Cameroon society. Having succumbed to the allure of degenerate power such character types perceive the fate of society as being tied up-as in Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh’s *The Inheritance*²⁴ – with the destiny of royalty.

The marxist aesthetician, Biodun Jeyifo derides bourgeois art in the following manner:

But precisely because they have not been consciously written for and about the popular urban and rural masses, these crucial groups and classes play a passive, almost invisible role in these plays. And these plays have all, more or less, been heavily imbued, with a mood and

spirit of despair, disillusionment, and even sometimes with a savage
misanthropic vision²⁵

Once tainted by corruption, Mikindong is satirized. The protagonist has shown a total lack of awareness on the boomerang effects of his actions while in police custody. Instead of finally regaining his freedom he is shown to be permanently trapped in the labyrinth of corruption. In a sense he seems to be denied any real knowledge of an irony of which he is largely the victim.

The irony of his situation then enables the audience to mediate the consciousness of Mikindong. His constant giving of bribes shows that at a point when he thinks he is free he will neither be able to change anything nor his situation. Mikindong and his friends in relation to the larger world can be considered; as the post-colonial African intellectual who, indirectly promote the negative ethnic that has overwhelmed the continent.²⁶

Awareness therefore becomes for this middle-class elite a reinforcement of their capitalist, Euro-centric education that emphasizes the golden virtues of passive resistance. In order not to rock the post-colonial state, ironically they are only emphasizing their colonial and slave mentality. Although Mikindong develops a sharper understanding between himself and the post-colonial society of Osse, his character does not grow in any positive way.

NOTES

¹ Bole Butake's *The Rape of Michelle* deals with the rape and thus sexual defilement of a teenager, Michelle Fokam by the 28 year old school master, Teacher Mikindong of Government Secondary School, Osse. For this indiscretion Michelle's mother, Rufina uses her connections with the Police Commissioner to exact the stiffest punishment. In spite of efforts by the practical and brilliant defense counsel, Barrister Zende, Mikindong, is not only remanded in Police custody but refused bail. He is further extorted by the police while in detention. Thus, through the affliction of Teacher Mikindong we are given an aperture into the sordid nature of Cameroonian society, of how corruption, greed and materialism have blunted justice.

² See M.H. Abrams *A Glossary of Literary Terms* p. 186

³ *The Rape of Michelle* p 39

⁴ M. H. Abrams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. p167.

⁵ *The Rape of Michelle*. P.18

⁶ *The Rape of Michelle* p.41

⁷ *The Rape of Michelle* p.41

⁸ *The Rape of Michelle* p.20

⁹ *The Rape of Michelle* p.20

¹⁰ *The Rape of Michelle* p.21

¹¹ *The Rape of Michelle* p.15

¹² *The Rape of Michelle* p.17

¹³ *The Rape of Michelle* p.17

¹⁴ *The Rape of Michelle* p.17

¹⁵ Butake's Policeman seems to be conceived in the mould of that archetypal roguish character in Wole Soyinka's most celebrated metaphysical play. *The Road* (1965)

¹⁶ See *The Rape of Michelle* p.11

¹⁷ *The Rape of Michelle* p.21

¹⁸ *The Rape of Michelle* p.17

¹⁹ *The Rape of Michelle* p.12

²⁰ *The Rape of Michelle* p.12

²¹ *The Rape of Michelle* p.21

²² *The Rape of Michelle* p.21

²³ See Lucien Goldmann. *The Hidden God*, p.17

²⁴ See Hansel Ndujoh Eyoh *The Inheritance* (1993) in which the playwright subscribes to the aristocracy's feudal notion of oppression and exploitation.

²⁵ Biodun Jeyifo. *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama* (1986) p.87.

²⁶ See Pierre Fandio. "Anglophone Cameroon Literature at Crossroads: Pierre Fandio in Conversation with Cameroonian Writer, Bate Besong" *African Literature Bulletin: A Publication of the African Literature Association*. Vol.30, No.2 Fall 2004/ No.3 Winter 2005. 90-104.

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