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## **Perversion of Democratic Process and Autocracy in Bosede Ademulua Afolayan's *Once Upon an Elephant***

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### **Abstract**

*Globally, writers are influenced by their ambiance. In Nigeria, intellectuals are part and parcel of their social environments. Achebe had remarked that politics and social affairs cannot be kept out of literature. As a result, the nucleus of several literary contents is on sociopolitical issues that concern perversion of democratic process such as dictatorship, bribery and corruption. That is why after sixty-three years of Independence and twenty-three years of democratic rule in Nigeria, cardinal players in the nation's election process remain a source of anxiety to some writers and the nation as a whole because credible elections play vital roles in any democratic regime. The fear is that if the culprits are not disarmed, they will eventually disarm the power of democracy in the populace. It is on this premise that this paper uses critical realism to examine *Once Upon an Elephant* in the light of the above scenario to contend that Bosede's*

*work is a portrait of the nation's political scene which any wise audience would unmistakably regard as a farce but it is real; where elderly men play hide and seek game and toy with the nation's destiny as in a children's moonlight game. However, from the play it is realized that the great law of cause-and-effect operates automatically like the force of gravity. In the play, the key players of perversion and autocracy did not escape.*

**Keywords:** Literature, democratic process, autocracy, politics, and critical realism

## **Introduction**

Like camera, literature captures the image of human society so it takes its contents from the realities of a nation's living condition; what they value either in past, present or future. Literary writers try to find out the causes and consequences of the nation's actions and inactions of citizens. In doing this, they expose the bad and the ugly, harsh and inhuman conditions such as poverty, misery, political operation, economic exploitation and excesses of men on top. This scrutiny is best achieved with drama because drama goes beyond mere words. It is unique because of its quality of pragmatism, proximity and power of interaction. In drama, everything is transformed into action and conversation before the glaring eyes of the audience and thus awakens them.

Playwrights have used dramatic approaches to expose perversion of democracy the nation has experienced. It has always been used as a veritable tool for the populace. Charles Ndigwe confirms that "theatre (drama) is thus a portent tool for expressing a point of view and mobilizing a people to adopt innovation that lead to social change..." (149). It thus signifies that drama is read or viewed because it reflects the society and offers solution to some disturbing challenges which threaten the societal peace through its power to convey an idea that is easily acceptable as true. In corroboration, Stanley Obuh states that drama's impact is direct and more immediate than other forms of expression. The immediacy and correctness of

drama also qualifies this form as that for inculcating social and political values (146).

## Conceptual Clarification

### Democracy

Democracy has been described by several scholars but none has deviated so much from the simple and popular definition propounded by Abraham Lincoln, a onetime president of America. He saw democracy as government of the people by the people and for the people. Since then, democracy has been accepted and practiced as the best form of governance more than ever. In a true democratic society, the welfare of the populace is ultimate. Since Independence, Nigerian democracy has been making an unsteady movement. Kelvin and Nathaniel recalled that:

*On 29<sup>th</sup> May 2022, Nigeria marked 23years since the return to democracy. This is the longest spell of administration, 62years after independence; compared to the three previous republics, it is a milestone. The First Republic lasted for six years, Second Republic lasted for four years and three months while the Third Republic was truncated after the presidential election on 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1993 and was cancelled by the military(169).*

During these long years of civilian rule, democracy still toddles in Nigeria. The major nation's political party, People's Democratic Party (PDP) was destroyed by fractionalization. It gave birth to All Progressive Congress (APC) that won in 2015. Their eight years of rule proved to be worse than the PDP they discredited. Ayoade made it clear that virtually all the ills that led to Nigerians railing against the PDP administration and its eventual ouster from power now assail the governing APC. Again on the fifth anniversary of Buhari's entrance to Aso Rock which also made it twenty-one years of unbroken democracy, Centre for Democracy and Development reports that:



Under President Buhari's leadership, APC has demonstrated the same toxic behaviour and corrupt norms that have characterized Nigeria's post-1999 electoral politics. Its modus operandi both in governing and while campaigning is indistinguishable from its predecessors (6).

As a result, many Nigerians have lost confidence in the country's democracy because our political juggernauts shamelessly continue to commit the offences they condemn again and again even with tougher impunity before the very eyes of the youths they ought to mould. They turn deaf ears to rule of law, free and fair elections. This evil practice started right from the time of Babangida who gave the nation the hottest slap on the face by annulling one of the fairest election held in African democracy on June 12, 1993. Oliver Agundu confirms that "1993 presidential election which has been adjudged to be the fairest and decisive in Nigerian history was annulled by military government of General Babangida" (50). The annulment shattered the hearts of Nigerians with its crisis and eventual imprisonment and death of the winner of the election. Remorselessly, he created an unlawful interim government headed by Shonekan Ernest by a coup d' etat which brought the autocratic Abacha into the scene.

The evil wind that blew harshly on democracy woke up many writers from slumber to make a clarion call against the reckless rulers; mostly to the detriment of their lives. Some of them lost their lives on the altar of the brutish rulers because they cried against perversion of democratic process. The nation lost the likes of Saro Wiwa in the process. Playwrights in spite of their relevance in the society remain endangered by a combination of forces (Tracie Utoh Ezeaju, 37). The positive stand of the playwrights as custodians and conscience of the society cannot be slacked as they expose the hidden agenda and perverse practices of our rulers. Emma Dandaura consolidates that: "a playwright is a member of the society, so naturally his artistic sensibilities are shaped and sharpened by socioeconomic condition and political happenings of his time" (2). It is this common goal that heralded Bosede as she creates her *Once Upon an Elephant*. She succeeded in creating perversion of

democratic process imaginatively in semblance to what is happening in Nigeria. Some Nigerian playwrights such as: Wole Soyinka in his *Play of Giants, Kongi Harvest, Opera Wonyosi and King Baabu*; Ola Rotimi in his *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*; FemiOsofisan in his *Yungba Yungba and Dance Contest*; Ahmed Yerima in his *Mojagbe* and a host of others have trailed this dramatic route.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts Critical Realism as its theoretical anchor because the theory reflects Bosede's play convincingly to her readers/audience. Realism is a way of expressing true life incidences through images; the way it should be in real life in a detailed documentation. Realism tries to depict reality with all its dichotomies so life is presented in literature in its full contradictions. As a result, the principle of describing real events is the highest priority. Romanticism presents life idealized, more picturesque, adventurous and heroic than real life, realism is a movement against romanticism. It began in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by Emile Zola. Charles Dickens and Withram Tecker's works contributed immensely to the rise and growth of critical realism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Again, the concept of critical realism was also adopted by Soviet literary and arts criticism from M.Gorky who used the expression in 1934 to describe stress as an expose in realistic literature. This theory has lasted for two centuries; therefore like Marxism it has gained variety of interpretations. But Gray holds that "realism is best used for writers who show explicit concern to convey an authentic impression of actuality, either in their narrative style or by their serious approach to their subject matter"(24).

As it is, the critical realist describes with much vividness and artistic skill; the chief traits of society from the democratic viewpoint. With striking force and truthfulness, the playwright creates a picture of democratic perversion portraying the misery and suffering of the common people. It is through the power of realism that Bosede showcases her corrupted society without compromise. She satirically portrays the ruling class in their greed for power,

charlatanism, betrayal and so on which are in contrast with the good heart and honesty of the obscure – the simple people of the lower class. There is still humour in her work. This humour is also replete in the Nigerian governance and slaying of democracy she is trying to portray where the defeated twists the crown from the hand of the winner and puts on his own head instead as if in a joke.

### **Bosede's Perception of Dictatorial Power and Intrigues**

Bosede's play is attested by synchronicity of its thematic perception and major concerns. Right from the front cover of the play, discernment is obvious; the colour combination and the sketch graphically announce dictatorship. From the front cover one is greeted with human legs wearing a pair of intimidating shoes that seem to swallow the infinitesimal specks of the populace. The horrendous legs are seen walking on the microscopic sized human beings. The size of the shoes and that of the human beings represent the perception of the dictator's ego and his powerless commoners. With that sketch, Bosede summarizes the nature of governance in Nigeria.

In *Once Upon an Elephant*, the protagonist, Ajanaku is the list of men to be used as example for the upcoming generation because his mood of ascendancy to the throne speaks terror. Like Nigerian politicians whose election phrases are nothing but 'make' or 'mar', 'do or die' Ajanaku used all corrupt means to get his crown. By DNA, he is not the son of Akanobi, the former king. Even if he is; he is not the first son. The dead king is to be succeeded by Baderin, the first son according to the demands of primogeniture of African culture. Ajanaku did not mind this ancestral heritage but uses all unconscionable and unethical means to constrain the king makers to choose him instead of the right person. Again, the king makers, the Guild of Hunters know the constitutional procedure, yet they collect bribe from the wrong person, crowned him and imposed him on the people against their choice. This is replete in Nigerian elections and actions of the Independent National Election Commissions (INEC). That is why there are still old stories of ballot-snatching, buying of votes, changing of figures and other incredible but ridiculous actions

least expected of children yet they are performed by old men just to enter Asorock. It seems true when some people say that we do not practice liberal democracy but gangster democracy. As a result, the immediate past election is stout with open-eyed manipulations.

Like Ajanaku most of the candidates who impose themselves have very rough edges and with their actions the youths who have participated like never before have their enthusiasm doused to the wall. In the play the medicine man, Serubawon prescribed ninety-nine day ritual that involves ritual rape of six virgin girls, 'Ijedodo' as one of the steps to solidify his bastard son's ill-gotten crown. The ritual rape feeds on the blood of the virgin girl to keep whoever does the rape alive while the virgin girl gradually but painfully dies. Ajanaku has raped five virgins but is caught in the middle when he raped Desola. His men have beaten her fiancé, Odekunle and snatched her from him. Besides, Desola is the medicine man's daughter who is also his half sister oblivious to him though. When the lion is roaring in the forest, his death is also counting down; but Ajanaku has no idea.

Ajanaku's ritual gives insight to the activities performed by politicians to win elections in Nigeria. Jegede describing Ibadan politics confirms that:

*As in most places in Nigeria, Ibadan politics' rituals and magic as practiced in African traditional Religion have become veritable instrument in the hand of politician as they play and practice Politics... participated in political campaign observed meetings and rituals of oath-taking and the Way the politicians came to priests and priestesses of Yoruba deities (42).*

By such portrayal, Bosede is simply suggesting that most of our politicians are acting under the guidance of flagrantly impious influences. Through such power, he may decide to be on the throne *ad infinitum* against the mandate of the people. During the elections in Nigeria, if their charms fail they divert to violence, ballot-snatching,

other manipulations and consult spiritual forces for their protection. Ameh Ogugua et al confirmed that:

*It has been discovered that many politicians seek protection and victory in election from spiritual forces by using ritual, charms and various forms of cultic practices. It was observed that politicians used all forms of weapons to protect themselves from assassination and all that characterize the present political terrain (26).*

The above excerpt indicates that those who decide the outcome of Nigerian electoral results are the priests of deities, Babalawos, native doctors and the likes of Sarobowon, the medicine man. Peterside reported that "some people apprehended for ritual killing and the witch doctor who performed the sacrifices accused the politicians, government officials, and wealthy business men of being their sponsors. They are said to use human beings for ritual to sustain their affluence and remain in position of power (Premium Times)." Most surprising is when Temidayo reports of a media report credited to a member of Lagos State House of Assembly, Moshood Oshun in which he indicted all Nigerian politicians of fetish practices saying that no political class can be vindicated from the use of charms. He revealed that they all tie charms around their waists, arms, and even rob on their bodies. He said that all politicians are into charms, that they patronize black powers to win elections. When he was confronted for making such rash statement, he denied the allegation saying that he was misquoted because he spoke in Yoruba.

One can rightly conclude that selfishness is the driving force of most politicians not sense of patriotism or service. That is why Ola Rotimi laughs at his hero's reason for joining politics: "to chop life...to chop a big slice of the national cake" (Our Husband Has...,4). To achieve that, he Rotimi's Lekoja-Brown believes in magical powers of the snake he keeps under his bed. But doubt about the potency of the supernatural powers arises when Lekoja and even Ajanaku break down before their destination. But before they reach their waterloo, they pervert democracy and express excessive love of

money and women. For love of women, Ajanaku arm-twisted Omoyemi from Delani her lover. Omoyemi consented to this coercion, she says: "I had to give in to his advances to protect my parents, and the man I love" (76).

Bosede as an emerging playwright has used her work to x-ray political misdemeanors in Nigeria. Her works cut across subject matters that are crucial to the country. He presents Ajanaku as a leader who is ideologically barren and too ridiculous to head a community. He is not capable of managing his autocracy and atrocities which characterize his governance. For instance, during his coronation ceremony, he brags about his potency and compares himself to that of 'Ajanaku'- the Yoruba praise name for elephant. Ajanaku means killer of 'ajana'. Ajana is a hunter who according to Yoruba legend tries to capture alive all kinds of animals but failed with an elephant; he was trampled to death. Bosede crafted this name to portray a person who bites more than he can chew and swallow but was swallowed by his prey in his pride. He views himself as an elephant in the midst of other animals. It is in excessive expression of his pride that utters: "but what exactly does an elephant do to creepers, and thorns, and bushes, and thickets, and a whole forest of trees standing on its own? He tramples them" (25). Perhaps, his confidence is in belief as immortalized specie having completed the rituals.

The playwright has used the work to prove that age has nothing to do with wisdom or sagacity. Solomon did not need the age of Metusaleh to be the wisest man in all generations. That is why it is not surprising to see a man as old as Serubowon subvert democracy of the community he is supposed be guiding as a diviner because old age is benchmark to be associated with discernment and prudence. Instead of being judicious and patriotic elder, he becomes the one manipulated by Ajanaku to ascend into a position every imbecile knows does not belong to him. In most traditional African societies, the elders are regarded as custodians and torch bearers of moral rectitude. They play the role of resolution of conflicts and their verdict is regarded as unerring because of the respect vested on them.



Like most elderly politicians in Nigeria, Serubawon could not play the enviable role of an elder or function as a custodian of moral value because he even betrayed and secluded the other chiefs clandestinely in his unethical activities. Odejimi, Ogundele, and Odegbami, the elders are oblivious of both 'Olubori' and 'Ijedodo' rites. He created these rites for Ajanaku's ascendancy without their consent. Serubowon's godfatherism is a subjective evidence and cause of violence and perversion of democratic process in the country. With the character of Serobawon, Bosede proves that there is nothing like Nigerian elders because there is nothing elderly about most of them. Some of them are political criminals, desperadoes, and moral assaults. Serubowon cannot control his libido; he fathers a child by sneaking into the life of King Akajiobi's wife to plant the seed that produced Ajanaku. With this obnoxious action, he backstabs both the old king, Dumoke his own wife; yet he prepares charms which would enable Ajanaku rape the virgins and immortalize himself. In her reaction, Iya Agba unleashes criticism on him: "what kind of man are you? Where on earth have you ever heard that any mortal being rivals the divine?" (77). When the elders inquired about the 'Olubori' rite, the medicine man simply tells them: "that involves only me... you not bother as such" (13). Still reacting against the rites, one of the elders, Odejimi laments: "our king lives, that is demanding that he dies, so that the rascal must be king; not even his brothers will know or can even do anything.." (18).

While the myopic villagers fold their arms and watch the scenario, a woman rises, Iya Agba rises and leads the downfall of Ajanaku by engaging Desola and Odunkule in a ritual mock battle with the king. With this, Desola snatches her life from him while dies the death he set for others. Bosede uses Iya Agba to portray the power of fearless women in pulling down despotic rulers and project the old story of triumph of good over evil. The elephant falls against the confidence in his machinations. The following African tyrants ended up against their expectation: Sani Abacha of Nigeria, Paul Biya of Cameroun, General Idi Amin of Uganda, Mammon Gadaffi of Libya, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, and a host of others.

## **Conclusion**

*Once Upon an Elephant* is Bosede's realistic depiction of nature of democracy in Nigeria since independence and how the leaders struggle by all nefarious means, ascend, and pervert the democracy they swear to uphold. From the play, it becomes obvious that most of these tyrants struggle into the throne for selfish interests not because of patriotism or to serve the populace. The playwright therefore portrays the men at helm of affairs such as Serubowon and King Ajanaku as men who pervert democracy through corruption, bribery, charms and rituals, violence and inefficiency. These are epitomized mostly in King Ajanaku, who despite his position in the palace and illegitimacy; and his ineptitude similar to Nigerian politicians of this 21<sup>st</sup> Century wants to perpetuate himself in the community leadership. But at the end, his evil intents backfired.



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