

# **STAGING POLITICS AS A MOTIF FOR CULTURAL ACTION: A DIRECTORIAL ARGUMENT FOR NWABUEZE'S *THE DRAGON'S FUNERAL***

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## **Abstract**

Playwrights world over and through the ages have responded to dominant socio-political, economic and religio-cultural issues in their environment with varying verses of revolutionary stunts. While dramatic literature is in search of its audience, some theatre directors have paved the way and have touched the sensibilities of their audience with spectacular performances that burlesqued with the people's customary traditions and socio-cultural conflicts. Emeka Nwabueze is one such playwright who has consistently satirized the Nigerian socio-political climate as exemplified in *A Parliament of Vultures*, *When the Arrow Rebounds* and *The Dragon's Funeral*. This research advocates for the staging of topical issues to bring to the fore the lapses in governance and the need for cultural action. Methodical analysis of the stage Performance of *The Dragon's Funeral* served as the research approach while the concept of Revolutionary Aesthetics explored the significant contributions of theatre to society. The researcher's findings reveal that staging politics is a loud visual strategy that will effortlessly create socio-political awareness among the people of Nigeria, and especially, the rural dwellers.

**Keywords:** Revolutionary aesthetics, socio-political, performance, staging politics, cosmological aesthetics.

## **Introduction**

Drama as actionable dialogue resides within the ambience of theatre which is one of the most sociable in the realm of art forms. Drama functions as a vehicle for social change through its performative nature, it restructures as it defines social relationships and ideologies. Hence the collaboration between playwrights and theatre directors has recorded a paradigm shift from the Aristotelian/individual heroism, tragic/social vision, to collective heroism as well as Brechtian mass awareness as a motive for social action.

Thus, young Nigerian playwrights in their “conscious ideological commitment” (Obafemi, 93), reason that it is uptime for Africans to reconstitute their nations through drama, by employing “the revolutionary potential of theatre to sharpen awareness, adopt an alternative approach (Socialist to be precise) to the obsolescence they find in the body politics of present-day Nigeria.” (Obafemi, 91) This obsolescence cannot be attributed to the influence of colonialism on the Nigerian polity. Though colonialism has made great impacts in Nigeria, all the same, it has also destroyed the norms and moral values of the people and has affected their sensibilities. However, the bulk of the blame must be rightly placed on the shoulders of Nigerians who have done nothing to free themselves of cultural and religious imperialism since many decades have passed.

The dramatic arts have the leverage and platform to stage topical issues. Its amenable stage forms, role-playing techniques and disguisable costumes outline the theatre as not only a propagandist tool but a weapon for mass instruction. Hence, writers “explore avenues of purging corruption and undemocratic governments from African system of governance” (Ogbonna, 33), using dramatic techniques. The ability of the dramatic arts to invent, imitate, satirize and re-live memory and everyday activity equips it with veritable tools that can revolutionize the system.

Scholars have also argued that Eurocentric dramas spiced with Western systems of governance have failed in Africa because such systems lack African ‘experience’. That is why George-Genyi informs that “Scholars are beginning to realize that importing Western models of leadership to solve the socio-economic and socio-political problems of developing countries like Nigeria is raising questions about the efficacy and relevance of such models.” (202)

It is, therefore, necessary that that point towards resolving Nigeria’s socio-economic and political crises integrate into its complications and conflicts local contents and social problems that negatively affect the people. Thus, Emeka Nwabueze’s *The Dragon’s Funeral* appropriates local content with varying verves of revolutionary motifs that ensure the achievement of positive change within the universe of the play. This research is therefore anchored on the performance of *The Dragon’s Funeral* as directed by Kelechi Stellamaris Ogbonna for the Alvan community on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of October 2018.

### **Revolutionary Aesthetics Conceptualized**

Staging politics within the ambit of revolutionary aesthetics is another weapon of conscientization that needs to be explored by dramatists and theatre directors. Revolutionary aesthetics is something new and different from Aristotelian drama/performance. It is connected with a movement to achieve socio-political change. It involves uprisings and actions that aim at correcting attitudes and ideologies to change the way that something is done. Revolution is synonymous with rebellion, radicalism and other range of influences that are tailored towards generating impact that could motivate into action. Without revolt which is an act of rebellion against oppression, anarchy and injustice, change would be impossible. Although not all revolutions lead to positive change, some even stagnate, but it is an extension of radicalism of which Edde Iji admits that “radicalism could be

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further modified to connote a dynamic psychosocial exuberance of the creative minority or an individual who revolts against the dominant modes or certain established conventions of the society.”(2)

Thus, revolution is an act that is corrective and “may also include a return to the basic principles of life distorted or dislocated through varied processes of corruption.” (Iji, 2) Radical situations leading to revolution had arisen in the past, in mind that “we see in Christ a radical existence and rebellion against entrenched authority.” (Hampton Turner, 51) hence, to revolt is innate and naturally human. It is an impulse to want to correct abnormal situations, to desire unity amid chaos. Therefore the creed of Ngugi Wa Thiongo that “violence, to change an intolerable, unjust social order, is not savagery: it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust oppressive social order is criminal” (8) appositely tells that appropriation of violence to achieve positive result is much needed in a society where crime and corruption is glorified. Nwabueze’s *The Dragon’s Funeral* awakens the women to their traditional duty. With an appropriation of subtle protest, Adaugo realizes that “our role as women is to cleanse the society of pollution. Whether the pollution was caused by our husbands, or children, or even strangers, does not matter.” (*Nwabueze*, 73)

Hence, writers in their evangelical thrust have mixed up their gospel of revolution with that of a reformist, the conservative, the abolitionist, and that of a reactionary. They propose change using different brands of revolutionary aesthetics; mostly alien to their environment. The playwright under study has tried to implement the use of traditional and cosmological aesthetics into *The Dragons Funeral* typified by the protest dance, the women’s collective struggle, the act of going naked before Okeosisi and the mock funeral of the dragon.

Thus, staging politics in the ivory tower is a step towards the formidable, but a movement further from the gown (educational environment) into the towns (villages, market place and church)

would be a step towards the achievement of the formidable. The dramatic arts, especially theatrical arts are revolutionary as it invents and dispenses characters, styles, modes, locales, and conventions, and it is a “radicalizing medium of expression, a notorious rebel, even against itself, from time immemorial, theatrical arts have been a great breeder of a class of the most ardent radicals in history.” (Iji, 4) The effortlessness at which the theatrical medium finds space for performance is an added advantage to its movement as it provides a platform where contradictions are resolved for the advancement of man and the betterment of society

### **Cultural Action versus Inaction**

Cultural action is a process or an awareness that enriches a person with the foresight or knowledge to analyze issues or the culture that shapes him or her towards reflection and a positive attitude/action plan. Paulo Freire in his article explains “the process of conscientization as an intrinsic part of cultural action for freedom.”(para.1)

Here, cultural action is the information, impact as well and response expected from the performance for/with the communities (audience), and by extension, the individual. Cultural action takes effect when the individual gains knowledge and puts it into action. It is the concept behind social action /thesis plays; to provoke action, response and create awareness. Emeka Nwabueze’s *The Dragon’s Funeral* engages its reader/audience with a thesis argument on the socio-political malaise of the colonial era piqued against contemporary vexations. The audience/reader’s reception/response to the play either through direct observation or participant observation ignites a positive action. Such plays/performances centre upon the audiences’ existential situations. Freire argues that the adult literacy process should be based on an:

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authentic dialogue between teachers and learners and leads not only to their acquisition of literary skills, but also, more importantly, to their awareness of their right as human beings to transform reality it is truly an act of knowing, through which a person can look critically at the world he/she lives in, and to reflect and act upon it. (para.4)

Therefore, staging politics is a conscientization process that burlesques with deeds and patterns that outline recognizable aspects of human beings capable of transforming their world. Kelechi Ogbonna observes that “the aesthetics of revolution in drama and theatre take different shapes as writers and directors device creative measures to purge the evils of the society” (32) and to ensure that the commitment of a writer is for the enhancement of his community, Soyinka asserts that:

We haven’t begun using words to punch holes inside people. But let’s do our best to use words and style when we have the opportunity to arrest the ears of people, we must make sure we explode something inside them which is a parallel of the sordidness which they ignore outside (Cited in Iji, 10)

Thus, revolutionary trends in theatrical performances are tailored towards conscientization and cultural action against inaction. Developing trends amongst stage directors and playwrights resuscitate performance models that provoke the audience to rise from inaction to agitative stance. Regina Ode also informs that “the writer uses a variety of techniques at his or her disposal to convey the message, but does not see the whole picture before the readers’s eyes.” (25) In this case, Nwosu strongly opines that:

The critique of a text must involve adequate consideration of its production attributes or else the play will either be deficient or problematic to produce.

Similarly, critique of performance without reference to text is like cultivating in the air, which is almost impossible (42)

Thus, the auteur approach adopted for the performance of the play under study establishes a link between text and performance. Dramatizing *The Dragon's Funeral* was therefore experimental and a movement away from the playwright's historied locale. Heretically (auteur) directed, the director deconstructed the locale, unhistoried the conflict and introduced sub-conflicts that motivated the women to break the overwhelming culture of silence before its contemporary audience.

### ***The Dragon's Funeral in Brief***

Emeka Nwabueze recreates the colonial experience and the breaking of silence by Ngwa women during the Aba Women's Riot of 1928. His scholarly drama; *The Dragon's Funeral* is a tale of the colonial administration and their 'commercial enterprise'. From Weir and Cook's dialogue, we glean that the British interest is in how the District Officers can effectively use the Warrant Chiefs to ensure proper collection of taxes. And because the Warrant Chiefs were appointed by the Administration, they are duty-bound. At first, tax was in the form of capitation and applicable to male adults only but as the greed of the colonial masters increased, they embarked on formulating a tax assessment based on the people's farm yields. The women strategize for a protest against the government. The Warrant Chiefs are in a dilemma because as weaklings before the District Officer, they have no alternative than to oblige them. Hence, Emeruwa is assigned the task of counting Men, women and their yields. This ignites friction between Emeruwa and the women. Consequently, the agitated women, with protest songs and cassava leaves in their hands march to Okeosisi's palace, confront all the Warrant Chiefs and achieve victory by taking their protest dance to the District Officer's lodge.

### **Staging Politics: *The Dragon's Funeral***

Playwrights and directors seem to have collaborated in their efforts to create awareness of socio-political issues. And because “theatre feeds on the culture of the society” (Yerima, 13) upon which it originates, it functions as a catalyst towards social change. Thus, new Nigerian dramatists and stage directors enhance spectacle aesthetics using cosmological aesthetics as motifs in drama and performance. These motifs enhance the understanding of the message as well as the lessons from the performance. Emeka Nwabueze’s appropriation of cosmological motifs such as protest dance, songs, cassava leaves and the storytelling format in *The Dragon's Funeral*, illustrates the people’s belief in their cultural traditions and in the potency of that culture. It affirms that the knowledge of the potency of the indigenous form is necessary. It affirms Teddy Hanmakyugh’s argument that:

Colonialism battered the self-esteem of the colonized people and made them lose faith in themselves as well as in things local thereby making them lose faith in their capacity to innovate or come up with worthwhile ideas. Colonialism demands that the people betray themselves; it demands that people scorn themselves and that people ignore their history to become the extension of another society. (151)

Hence, Nwabueze has not only captured the “battered self-esteem” of women during the “Aba Women’s Riot”, but has made a statement on the injustices and prejudice against women as well as the anarchy in governance. It is “a social drama which reflects political manoeuvring, gender emancipation and social conflict. It is a roar of protest against the masters who made the laws and the invisible rulers who enforce them.”(Nwabueze, Blurb) As a social commentator, *The Dragon's Funeral* serves as a metaphor for failed leadership. It is a re-enactment of the woes that have befallen

the people and their response to it. Nwbueze's creation; Ádaugo, is infused with the revolutionary verve as she informs:

**Adaugo:** Women of my ancestral land, there is dust in the air. Evil men have enveloped our land. The name of that evil, that dust, is government. We have heard different rumours about what the government is doing and even what it intends to do. Our husbands have heard it, our children have heard it, and even the trees of our land have heard it. The serene atmosphere of this village will soon be disrupted by the strangers in our midst who call themselves government. If we go to the market, it is the government, if we cough, it is government. Women of Ngwa land, shall we escape into the ant-hole because of the government? (*Nwabueze*, 18)

The above lines from *Adaugo* formed the spine and metaphor of Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral* as performed for the college community of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri. The play ran for two matinees, after which it was taken to two Local Government Areas for 'August Meeting' celebration in Imo State. The motif of folktale was repeatedly used to recount events passed. The call and response used in movement one established the exposition foreshadowing that the storyline is a historic one. Ekwedike's folkloristic excellence primed the women into an incisive re-enactment. But when the representatives of the Colonial Administration entered the stage with an air of superiority engaged in the following dialogue:

**Cook:** How do we assess earnings from palm oil?

**Weir:** Very simple. Just estimate the number of trees controlled by the average farmer and the annual yield from the trees. That will give you the figure.

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**Cook:** From what I have heard about these people, the palm tree has different functions which are nursed according to gender. The man taps the wine and cuts down the palm fruits, but the woman sources out the palm oil. Do we restrict the taxation to the ones traditionally reserved for men?

**Weir:** Rubbish. That will contradict the instructions from headquarters. Just tax palm yield and forget this issue of gender. You are not in Europe.

**Cook:** But that will be tantamount to taxing women.

**Weir:** Does it matter? The natives don't deserve such considerations. We've brought them civilization and they should pay for it even if they have to sell their children...(Nwabueze, 31-31)

The audiences at this point of dramatization were uproarious and with fury, they began to shout down the actors; thus, frowning at the impudence of the colonial masters. It was obvious that the potency of the stage could not be denied especially with an enthusiastic audience. The director's approach through the deconstruction of the play text enabled the performance to engage its audience within a tense period of forty-five minutes; it affirmed that "there exists a link between the script and the performance itself." (Canice Nwosu, 42). The director targeted to informing women; not only of their rights but also to raise consciousness of governmental projects, policies and lapses as well as the need to resist all forms of systemic corruption: hegemony and socio-economic and political maladies. This also affirms Mbachaga and Wuese's viewpoint that: "the art of theatre strongly articulates this truth through proverbs, symbols, satire and songs. Weaving tales and rhymes that confront power and question the conscience of the

system and its ethical structures.” (31) Articulating the “truths” on stage by deconstructing imageries and metaphors in *The Dragon’s Funeral* was shaped with the event and audience in mind. Thus, it was uptime and appropriate when the play’s excerpts formed part of the entertainment for the August Meeting in certain communities within Owerri North. Adaugo’s speech before her fellow women resounded thus:

**Adaugo:** Then, my sisters, we should grab our future with both hands. Information is an indispensable tool for anyone who wants to change the lot of his community. We have heard that there will be a new policy where women would be taxed by that dreadful monster called government... We shall resist any attempt to harass us. We shall put things in order. Our quiet land has turned into fracas fire. It has become a place where strangers milk people without any moral scruples or conscience. And our men look weakly and do nothing. We should not be afraid to fight... (Nwabueze, p.18-19)

The clapping, excitement and ululation from the audience signified acceptance of the message, and a resolve to actualize the goals stated in the performance and the audience gained awareness of the potentials of collective struggle. That is why Mgbòkwọ retorts that “...we shall not only fight the government. We shall fight anyone that blocks our way.”(Nwabueze, 20) And when a large member of the audience kept chorusing “exactly!”, “yes” and a resounding applause to the verve in the agitation of the actors, the atmosphere was charged with fresh enthusiasm and a sudden realization of the political manoeuvrings and manipulations within our society.

Dance intermissions and songs were used to create laughter, reduce tension and at the same time create space for people to ponder on what just happened and possible ways forward. Truly, drama does not solve problems but proffers solutions and points ways forward. It was after the second intermission with

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Ekwedike's folkloric interlude that the women of *The Dragon's Funeral* displayed their communiqué inter alia:

**Adaugo:** Women of our land, have we agreed to fight together?

**Women:** Yes!!

**Adaugo:** That nothing will stand in our way?

**Women:** *Ncha ncha*!! No, no!!

**Adaugo:** That whatever blocks our way must be confronted with vehemence?

**Women:** *Oge elugo*! It's time for action!

**Adaugo:** Are we ready to fight for our rights?

**Adaugo:** That whatever blocks our way will face the wrath of the women?

**Women:** Yes!!

**Adaugo:** Now, I want to make one thing clear to all of you. Once we start, there's no going back. Our aim is not to fight our husbands. Our aim is not to confront men unnecessarily, even if they are strangers, our aim is not to show that we are indispensable to men... our aim is to fight injustices... (Nwabueze, 23-24)

The women's resolve to reject the imposition of tax on them coincided with the ongoing event; the August Meeting. The people needed to make decisions after the meeting. The performance pricked their conscience and raised questions on grey areas that their intervention is needed, it was a teaser. But, Edde, Iji captures it succinctly when he says that "without challenge, without revolution, and without a certain degree of radicalism the world would stagnate."(1) Hence stereotyping characters with revolutionary tendencies may help to ostracize a bad government, cow terrorists or a group to conform to the rule and ethics of the society. Best Ugala supports this view when he opines that

revolutionary theatre aims at revolutionizing the masses to challenge and even seek to overthrow the system that chokes them (38), by highlighting the social conditions and contradictions that determine the fate of the masses.

Having staged *The Dragon's Funeral* several times for the same audience in Alvan community, the director organized a workshop for a script conference where she emerged with an adaptation of Chinedu's *The Vulnerable Throne* and Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral* titled "Women of Umunjam". Subsequently, this adaption of Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral* was performed at the Provost's Validation ceremony. It seemed that the recognizable figures and the cosmological aesthetics injected in the performance using a defamiliarization concept enhanced both aesthetics and message.

### **The Impact of *The Dragon's Funeral* as Performed**

It was the closing ceremony for the 2018 August Meeting in Owerri zone. So women wanted to add glamour and spectacle to the event. Besides, since the wife of the governor was coordinating it in all the Local government areas of Imo state and amongst them were government functionaries, it was a potent venue to deliver the message. At first, the producers of this performance wanted a dance that could thrill and mesmerize the audience within 20-30 minutes. Again, between the time of the invite and the date of the event were only four days. Of truth, dance would have been the easiest thing to put together for them, but our dancers were not around because the school was on vacation. But we just ended production of *The Dragon's Funeral* for the Alvan community and ninety per cent of the actors were Evening Programme students of the department. Because my colleague had already accepted this engagement, we had no choice but to modify the production we just had by editing the performance to fit within 35-40 minutes depending on the mood and tempo the Found Space would allow.

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So, it was not only a surprise when the performance started with a traditional dance as opening glee and gradually developed into a fascinating action that gripped the audience. Both tempo and mood created an atmosphere of deadly silence except with interjections from the crowd affirming, applauding and aligning with the course. Using familiar indigenous forms to create a formidable protest, the audience realized that these indigenous forms have regenerative ideologies that can be explored. We could not on the spot conduct a Focused Group Discussion on the audience to know the level of acceptance, but comments from the audience showed that topical issues such as this should be taken to the people. A government functionary in attendance in the closing remarks pointed out that “women need to be informed on matters of the past; they should be acquainted with how our mothers were able to protect their families as well as the contributions they made to the society.” The awareness from the performance refreshed the audiences’ minds on how women asserted themselves before the colonial authority. And because it was a performance paid for, the organization in charge of the August Meeting closing ceremony for that community was pleased with our story and commended us.

## **Conclusion**

The research has been able to pinpoint the huge benefits that could accrue from staging politics. It assures that staging topical issues for the masses/electorate will help to inform, educate and conscientize the populace. We also acknowledged that the theatre culture is dying a natural death because of insecurity and high rate of poverty in the land, we reasoned that the way out could be to adapt these performances into short films as a way of preserving, promoting and conscientizing the masses towards the ideals the dramaturgy offers. As a motif for cultural/ social action, the research reasons that since colonialism and religious/cultural imperialism are the major problems for Nigeria’s socio-political crises, it would be a step in the right direction to emphasize the

staging of topical issues where histories can be recreated and cosmological aesthetics re-awakened to refresh people's mind and imbue them with fresh verve and hunger for social change. Hence, dramatists have awakened in the area of theatre performance, to spice the 'African experience' with indigenous content as necessary condiments to be injected into the melting pot of the theatre. Oftentimes, plays classified as "Good" and written by reputable playwrights are often deconstructed by a contemporary stage director whose vision is brought into the performance to meet the needs of the target audience.

Challenges may abound in this direction, but proof from the performances we have taken to the people shows that certain traditional knowledge has survived while Western technologies falter. People identify with their values while learning from others, though the average Nigerian youth believes that whatever is foreign means that it is original, but the key to survival within our clime is identity and glocalization. Hence, there is a need to look at the curricula, and the indigenous forms, to know what works for us and what can be used to redirect society positively. Sponsorship and funding pose a threat to the advancement of staging politics because neither the government nor the educational system can append their signature to this proposed vehicle of enlightenment and awareness. The quest for a social action/cultural action resides only with the marginalized whose limitations may not offer them the platform to voice their dissatisfaction. Research also shows that the small and the new media hold powerful tools that can famously unlock the voices of the marginalized, but the action and inaction depend so much on implementations, and the government in power. while it is the primary function of the theatre to point the way forward, it behoves the masses to act on it.

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