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Drama and the Politics of Climate Change in Nigeria: a Critical Appraisal of Greg Mbajiorgu's *Wake Up Everyone*

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Abstract

Johnny Igbonekwu observes that ‘an obvious primal instinctive human quest’ is to “conquer the world” but he equally notes that man has not been able to achieve this goal, in spite of his “formidable intellectual assaults on the multifarious stupendous mysteries of the world” (*Talk About Man* 1). The quest for all manner of domination-economic, political, territorial, and spatial, etc, has driven man into invention and mindless application of technology which in choking nature, cause it to frequently retaliate through global warming, tsunami, landslide, erosion, and flooding of different dimensions. The constant decimation of human lives, businesses, buildings, and municipal services as well as the emergence of perturbing diseases owing to these palpable effects of natural disaster, force the issue of climate change to occupy a significant place in the world of environmental studies and research. This paper seeks to explain the place of drama in tackling the problem of climate change through a detailed analysis and interpretation of Greg Mbajiorgu's *Wake Up Everyone* considered to be a giant impact assessment study and provocative wake-up call.

[**Keywords:** Johnny Igbonekwu, *Wake Up Everyone*, politics, climate change, environmental studies, technology]

Introduction

Wake Up Everyone is a dramatic tour de force on the subject of climate change. It articulates its causes, dramatizes its effects, and politics and demonstrates how the latter makes the idea of its mitigation in the country a tragic one. However, the playwright sees climate change as a result of man's ruthlessness against nature and posits that the menace can be redressed by humanity through pragmatic efforts. The dramatization of the play in its abridged form at the Princess Alexandria's Auditorium of the University of Nigeria Nsukka, in 2011, convinces the elated audience that drama can make any familiar human condition “alive and immediate” (Edman 26), thereby debunking Butler's view that “climate change is a difficult issue for dramatists”. Indeed, what Mbajiorgu's play shows is that climate change requires inter-disciplinary approach and that drama is a crucial tool for exploring its intricacies and communicating its messages in a produced and urgent way than any other means of communication.

Synopsis

Wake Up Everyone is a play in three Acts, set in Ndoli, a fictitious oil-rich community. It depicts how the politics of oil revenue prevents the leaders of the community from tackling the environmental problems of the land and to ignore the warning to take proactive step to avert impending flood. As a matter of fact, the play brings the people, the intelligentsia, and the politicians together in a climate changing scene in order to show how conservatism, lack of unity of purpose, and self-aggrandizement thwart genuine efforts at climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Analysis

In the first place, the playwright sees climate change as an aspect of “the contradiction of the world’s capitalism”, a direct result of a mad rush “to share in the spoils of the new global economy” (*Natural Causes* xvi). In other words, he argues that climate change is not something externally imposed on man by an angry God as a punishment for the fall of man, but a consequence of “man’s mindless activities on earth” (Act One, Scene one). According to Professor Aladinma who represents the image of the intelligentsia in the play:

The soil and the rivers have become unproductive because of the chemicals and oil we pour on them. The flood and erosion we experience are caused by our senseless attempts to reclaim wet lands and our blockages of original water channels and drainages. What about carbon monoxide from power generators and all kinds of vehicles, or the unfriendly substances flared up into the air by oil companies on daily basis. The problems of our world are created by man (Act One, Scene One)

Above is an eloquent statement that the history of climate change is the history of man and his quest for development. It shows that climate change is an effervescence of man’s economic activities and the politics that goes with them. In fact, the reasons posited as the causes of climate change in the text suggest that man is at war with nature. James O’ Connor in his book, *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* states that nature is both “tap” and “sink”. According to him:

Nature is a tap in the sense that the means and objects of production and reproduction (i.e., all human material products) are appropriated in various forms from the earth. Nature is a sink in that ultimately all human products, including unwanted byproducts of the immediate process of production, are returned in different forms to the earth (xi).

The implication is that there must be a constant balance between the function of nature as both tap and sink and that any imbalance between the two (which is mostly the case) spells doom for humanity. The play suggests that the ecosystem is severely under human pressure. It demonstrates that mindless exploitation of oil puts unbearable burden on nature leading to unabated “loss in biodiversity, rapid deterioration of land cover and

depletion of water availability through destruction of catchments and aquifers" (*Global Warming* 54). Antonia Darder in her preface to Kahn's *Critical Pedagogy* states that:

In its consuming frenzy to gobble up the natural resources of the planet earth for its own hyperbolic quest for material domination, the exploitative nature of capitalism and its bourgeoning technocracy has dangerously deepened the structures of social exclusion through the destruction of the very biodiversity that has been the key to our global survival for millennia (xii).

In a play-within-the-play anchored in Act two, Scene three, the playwright carefully dramatizes the awful effects of climate change on the lives of the people. Adaora laments the draught in the north which is attributed to "global warming" arising from "stripping nature the fundamental resources that sustain life". It is here argued that "Humanity's brutal and outrageous quest for wealth and development has nothing but the promise of doom and poverty for the children's generation". Thus, in a dream-like-world, Ekene, one of the characters in the play, is frightened by tornadoes and earthquakes tumbling down buildings and other efforts of the so-called civilized man. But the fiction of the imaginary world is reinforced by the shards of experiences arising from the Calabar flood in which the character lost everything and everyone dear to her. In her words:

I lost every soul and everything

I cherished to that flood... and for months I had no means of livelihood. The angry water turned me into a hopeless wanderer for months (Act Two, Scene one).

This actual loss becomes a distressing nightmare and a thorn in the flesh for Adaora, constantly harassing her and even inducing in her a death-wish.

The hullabaloo between Mazi Chinedum and his wife Ugodiya in Act Three, scene two over lack of fish for soup preparation illustrates the impact of climate change on the family. The absence of fish in the river which breeds the quarrel between husband and wife, clearly demonstrates that as N.J. Bello states, "the aquatic ecosystems are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate fluctuations and change" (20). Oil spillage which is the major cause of the loss of biodiversity is also a principal factor that leads to poor agricultural yield. In the same Act and scene of the play poor harvest is attributed to the barrenness of the earth and intolerable rainfall.

Furthermore, a fundamental issue analyzed in *Wake Up Everyone* is government's insensitivity to climate change mitigation, and adaptation, and this borders on poor leadership, which Chinua Achebe sees as the trouble with Nigeria. Professor Aladinma who is posited in the play as a symbol of hope and salvation and who has been educating the rural farmers on the new modalities of planting in a changing environment, alerts, the local government Chairman on the impending doom arising from anticipated flooding. He tells him that The United Nations Development Programme has made provisions for projects like the construction of dykes that will fortify our river banks so that our land doesn't become vulnerable to flood in future (Act One Scene one), but the Chairman apparently not interested in the plights of the people, considers the project a white-elephant affair and is unwilling to mobilize effort to generate counterpart fund. Rejecting

the suggestion to contact oil firms working in the area for help, the Chairman tells Professor Aladinma unreservedly:

Listen, this local government headquarters was recently refurbished by Zodiac Oils, the three-eighteen-seater buses and two Toyota Hilux trucks out there were donated by Continental Petroleum, my official Prado Jeep came three weeks ago as a birthday gift from the Managing Director of Diamond Oil, and all of these oil companies came together to raise me a loan with which I ran the election for this position. I have not even begun to think of how to pay back the money and you are asking me to go back to them, plate in hand like Oliver Twist, asking for more?

The Chairman's statement above makes certain facts about the idea of governance in the play's environment obvious. Here government is seen as a means of self – aggrandizement. Every element which money is spent on in Chairman's speech, is a token of status symbol and ego massage, a means of showcasing and entrenching the self. Not a single item there serves the interest of the people. The Chairman's opinion represents government's apathy to the problems of the people. He merely asks the Professor to go and package a proposal to be presented to the council, as a way of respectfully pushing the octogenarian out of his office, for immediately the Professor leaves, he begins to fume about his demand:

Stupid old man. What does he think he is? I Edwin Onyechonkeya, the crocodile of the creeks, the unsterilized knife that cuts the thick balls of Oyibo, release money for such useless project? Nonsense, Nonsense! (Act One, Scene one).

The personality of the local government Chairman, indeed, paints a tragic picture of the disturbing social relations in Nigeria. One aligns with the people in search of power and soon dumps them immediately the dream is actualized. The Chairman was formerly a member of a militant group that fought oil companies for desecrating their land through oil spillage. His discussion with Jango below illustrates how he secured power:

Jango: So tell me, how did it happen?

Chairman: Jango my brother, it was a fierce battle, one that I'm glad I won. You know, with the government clamp down and subsequent amnesty for militants, it was no longer good business remaining in the creeks. Some of our leaders negotiated their ways into high positions in government while others who had no better alternatives for surviving, resorted to kidnapping and other illegal practices. I was at the verge of forming my own kidnapping gang when the massive oil spillage which almost damaged the entire agricultural land in Ndele village occurred.

Jango: Yes, I heard about the spillage, man that was a terrible one.

Chairman: It was. The most painful side of it is that it claimed my father's life.

Jango: Oh, my God! Your father is late?

Chairman: Yes, my brother, but I made those blood suckers pay for it.

Jango: Very good! How many of their staff did you waste?

Chairman: No, no, no, no, my brother. I am too wise to do that. All of the lives we wasted in the creeks, what have they benefited us? Was it not the bomb you exploded at the local police station that made you to escape to U.S.? (they laugh mischievously)

Jango: So how did you smoke them?

Chairman: I saw in the oil spillage incident a grand opportunity to get back at the multinational oil companies. When the event occurred, I got a fiery lawyer that has been at the vanguard of environmental issues to initiate a legal action against the oil companies. When they perceived the legal consequences and the attendant damages, they resolved to invite me, as the plaintiff, for alternative dispute resolution.

Jango: Wao! I can't believe this. So, what finally happened?

Chairman: Through my lawyer, of course, we agreed that they pay three hundred million naira.

Jango: Three hundred million naira!

Chairman: Yes, three hundred million naira cash, and in addition, they agreed to bankroll my political bid to be the Chairman of Ndoli local government area, on the condition that I don't make any further case on behalf of the other affected farmers (Act One, Scene One).

The discussion between the Chairman and his friend Jango is quoted elaborately in order to highlight the intricacies inherent in power acquisition and climate change politics in the country. The discussion reveals clearly how the incessant oil spillages in the Delta region of the country has become a springboard and handsome means for the fittest to become rich and powerful. Also, the revelation of the Chairman shows the negative effect of global finance and how international agencies control governments of local nation-states. The play demonstrates that certain people in authority are installed by the oil companies and this makes it utterly impossible for them to genuinely deal with the problem of environmental degradation occasioned by oil exploitation in the region. In his inaugural lecture, Okechukwu Ibeanu argues that "politics is about managing or reconciling affluence and affliction, principally though not exclusively through the instrumentality of states power" (9). He maintains that a genuine politician or office-holder aspires to "establish inverse relation between affluence and affliction such that there is a steady increase in the numbers experiencing affluence and decrease in the numbers experiencing affliction" (9). However, the Chairman's notion of politics and his attitude towards climate change mitigation merely agree with Ibeanu's opinion that "political science in Nigeria is oriented towards the affluent and pays lip service to the afflicted" (10).

The Chairman's utterances and behaviour indicate that, in the context of the play, "politics is about creating affluence for a few, not about eliminating affliction for the

many” (10). In fact, Ndoli local government is posited by the playwright as a microcosm of Nigeria. What happens in the world of the text is, according to Ibeanu, “emblematic of all that is wrong with political science in Nigeria” (15). The envisaged flood which finally occurred at the end of the play is part of the conflagration occurring in the country and which showcases government’s indifference to the plight of the masses.

Barely, one year after its publication, the flood anticipated in the text and which eventually took place at the end of the play, occurred in all the regions of Nigeria. And this shows that climate change is not a fiction but a fact that must be taken seriously. By juxtaposing different segments of our society in the play – the people, the intelligentsia, and the politicians, Mbajiorgu appears to be saying that the issue of climate change adaptation and mitigation is a collective responsibility. Elaborating this, Damian Opatá states in the blurb of the play that:

The reality and seriousness of the issues dramatized in this play call for sustained concern by political and community leaders at whatever level of governance. Indeed, the play suggests that sustaining a balanced and productive environment is an insistent social obligation for all of humanity.

Wake Up Everyone is a provocation call for us to “defend ecological values and sensibilities” (O’connor xv). It argues that playing politics with our environment amounts to gambling with our lives and world. It suggests that there should be a new view of our world and that there should be urgent and meaningful solutions to the problematic of climate change, “solutions unfettered by the dehumanized thought we have tragically allowed to develop through (Fill, 30), the years. In the “Wake up! Wake up!” song, Mbajiorgu who feels that it is not yet Armageddon, outlines practical steps that must be taken to ameliorate the extremities of climate change as follows:

Wake up! Wake up! Everyone, X²
 To build our world anew
 No burning down our bushes
 No polluting our rivers
 No more deforestation.

To guarantee our future
 No greenhouse gas emission
 No heating up our planet...

Let’s stop oil pollution
 No more flaring of gases
 No cutting down our forests
 Wake up!

For new green world agenda
 Let’s plant some trees today
 Let’s save wild life from dying

Wake up!

The above theme song of the play encapsulates the playwright's position that the thought of conquering nature ought to be turned into thought of friendly relationship with nature. It is a known fact that aggressive reduction in vegetation cover has opened many parts of the country to dangerous action of both rain and wind erosion. In the northern part of the country excessive temperature leads "to dry conditions which underlie accelerated wind erosion" (Eheazu 55), while excessive rainfall in the south occasions catastrophic rain - induced erosion. This is the reason the idea of avoiding deforestation is salient. Similarly, emission of carbon monoxide, gas flaring, and pollution of land and rivers through oil spillage are known to have caused loss in biodiversity, deterioration of land and increase in sea level. Erection of construction sites and buildings indiscriminately have continued to cause blockages to natural waterways thus exposing the country to constant flooding. It is in the light of all this that the playwright's strategies for climate change mitigation and adaptation in the play must be taken seriously.

Conclusion

Wake Up Everyone, the first African play on the subject of climate change, demonstrates vividly that climate change is a palpable human experience in Nigeria. It shows that the causes of climate change such as deforestation, emission of greenhouse gases, blockage of natural water ways, and constant oil spillage arising from aggressive global competition for oil, all occur in the country. The text equally dramatizes the disturbing effects of climate change on the Nigerian environment and human lives. The vexing issue is not that the climate is rapidly changing in the country but, according to the play, government's indifference and lip-service approach to the issue of climate change adaptation and mitigation. What is painful is that the Chairman of Ndoli local government area in the play initially posed as an environmental activist before an oil spillage that killed his father gave him advantage to hobnob with oil companies that eventually sponsored him to win election. Now in rapturous embrace with the power that be, "Hon. Edwin Onyechonkeya" blocks the building of defences... and "resilience against the effects of climate change in rural Nigeria" ("Nigerian theatre mixes oil" 1). In the personality of this "single character, the play conveys the immediate, turbulent, deceptive forces underlying oil production in Nigeria" (1).

However, the playwright through the character, Madukwe Aladinma, insists that there is still hope. Aladinma's role in educating the rural farmers on the modalities of coping with their changing world is a significant effort in the direction of climate change adaptation and mediation, but the playwright equally feels that the intelligentsia and the rural people's effort must be strongly supported by government if the environment must be saved from utter destruction. The flood which occurred at the end of the play is an eloquent testimony of "the danger of ignoring the warnings of the natural world, especially when coupled with egregious governmental neglect of impoverished people" (*Critical Pedagogy* xi). Greg Mbajiorgu's play seeks to move us beyond capitalist

consumerism, beyond the rhetoric of environmentalism masked by neoliberal politics, to that concrete and pragmatic context where urgent and meaningful steps must be taken to redeem our world from the ravaging effects of technology.

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