

Corruption in Nigeria, Popular Culture or Norm: A Reading of Irobi's *Cemetery Road* (2009) and *Nwokedi* (1991)

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Abstract

*Apart from defining corruption as dishonest or fraudulent conduct by people in power, this study sees it as the most dangerous mishap that can ever befall a country. Corruption cannot be exempted to exist in other parts of the world, but the rate at which it is ravaging some African countries is alarming. However, this paper focuses on the Nigerian situation. Charles Luke citing M. Watts (2008) states that the effect of corruption in Nigerian society cannot be overemphasized. He portrays corruption as the major impediment to the economic development of the nation. Standing on this premise, this paper ventures into classifying corruption as either a popular culture or a norm in Nigeria. Popular culture is essentially a set of beliefs, values, actions, objects, or goods and practices that are popular at any given time and space in society. While norms can be said to be behaviors exhibited by humans, or what the human believes and are acceptable. This paper, therefore, seeks to analyze the role of Nigerians in embracing corruption as either a popular culture or a norm. A close analysis of Irobi's plays; *Cemetery Road* (2009) and *Nwokedi* (1991) is done in line with this discussion to show the effort embarked upon by patriotic Nigerians to ensure a deterrent in corrupt practices. This paper concludes that salvaging the country from corruption is the responsibility of every Nigerian.*

Keywords: corruption, popular culture, norms, responsibility, economic development.

Introduction

When discussion about corruption erupts, focus is usually placed on the leaders, often neglecting the role played by the leader in enhancing corruption in the state. It is important to note that the act of corruption is not a one-sided practice. Corruption therefore is a practice that involves the leader and the leader; it is

inherent in both young and old, male or female, rich or poor. In some instances, even the least person in the society cannot be exonerated. The cleaner who demanded a bribe before cleaning the office and the governor who diverted public funds into his account have committed corruption. It is often hypocritical when only the leaders are blamed for corrupt practices. Many researchers have defined corruption and all their definitions tend towards the inadequacies of leaders of the nation in question. Begovic (2005) defines corruption as intentional non-compliance with the arm's length principle aimed at deriving some advantage for oneself or related individuals from this behavior (p.2). In the same spirit, Gbadeyen et al in agreement with Agbiboa (2012) in their submission defines Corruption as a;

political environment which leads to practices of political leaders who do not contribute to the effective administration of the country's economic conditions and fair redistribution of income and resources.

In a general perception, corruption is seen as dishonest or fraudulent conduct by people in power. Though this perception may not be predominantly false, attention should also be drawn to the general public who form the bulk population in society. These people (the general public) also in many ways contribute to the high rate of corruption, either in action or otherwise. It is therefore, also of great importance to note that corruption is not only associated with the embezzlement of money by individual or ruling government, it traverses a large span of area, dimensions, techniques, and illegal activities in government offices (state and federal), individual organization, market places, schools and even in religious houses, and not to say the least, in individual homes. It is not even out of place to say that corruption is innate in man because man would naturally want to have everything to himself, a selfish act, and selfishness breeds envy which may later lead to corruption. In other words, the act of corruption can also be seen as a dubious means or desire to possess the other party's belongings or nursing the urge to possess everything. Corruption has so many affiliates which include demanding compensation before any work is done, giving incentives to hasten any action which is classified as bribery, collecting money for work not done,

hiking of prices for projects and poor execution of projects, and so many other acts not mentioned. The high rate of corruption in the country has become a thing of concern. Writers have tried to investigate its causes and probably suggest a solution to this heinous act that has continued to ravage the country. *Corruption in Nigeria: Patterns and Trends*, the *Second survey on corruption as experienced by the population* published by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) dwells extensively on the analysis of bribery; indicating who takes or gives bribes. It also discovers that bribes are mostly paid to speed up a procedure (38 percent), while the share of bribes paid to avoid the payment of a fine reached 21 percent (UNODC: 2019). This is an indication therefore, that the act of corruption can also be a “cause and effect” syndrome where there is an expectation of reward before carrying out official duty and to an extent, an act of intentional negligence of duty if there is no incentive attached. It is this sort of practice that birthed the popular slang regarded as “nothing goes for nothing”. In the same spirit, Alege et.al affirm that;

There are different vocabularies used to describe corruption in Nigeria. Some of these are bribery, extortion (money and other resources extracted by use of coercion, violence, or threats), embezzlement (theft of public resources by public officials).

All these instances are cases peculiar to the Nigerian society. A very conspicuous example is the Nigerian Police Force which extracts money from members of society in many ways; it can be through bail which is assumed to be free. In this case, victims are made to pay a certain amount of money to fill out the bail form. These amounts are usually not uniform. The amount is determined by the situation surrounding the victim's arrest. At this point, the victim and (or) relation pay at will to secure freedom for the victim. Another avenue of engaging in corrupt practices by the police force is illegal extortion from motorists who ply Nigerian roads. In most cases, such drivers do not possess accurate or complete vehicle documents, or driving licenses which is an illegal act. To avoid the wrath of the law, such offending driver (s) resort to bribing Officer in charge. Bribery is also common in ministries where there are “kickbacks” before contracts are awarded. In recent dispensations, even getting

employed in government parastatals either federal or state becomes a daydream without paying for it. All these are instances of corrupt practices carried out by the general public (the common and ordinary man). It is an indication that corruption is an event in the domain of everybody irrespective of class and category. In the same vein, bribery and corruption in recent Nigerian dispensation is no longer seen as a crime but a share of the national cake. Therefore, as long as this paper agrees and establishes that there is corruption, the cause may not solely be heaped upon the rulers. Corruption occurs as a result of certain situations. According to Alege et.al. quoting Maduagwe (1996) states;

Several factors have been identified as instrumental to enthrone corrupt practices in Nigeria. These include briefly, the nature of Nigeria's political economy, the weak institutions of government, and a dysfunctional legal system. Absence of clear rules and codes of ethics lead to the abuse of discretionary power makes most Nigerians vulnerable to corrupt practices. The country also has a culture of affluent and ostentatious living that expects much from "big men", and extended family pressures (p.211).

This is in line with the submission of Aluko (2009) that; corruption has become a way of life in Nigeria, one which existing governments neither wish to nor can control (p.1). Therefore, corruption in Nigeria has birthed so many corrupt practices like; nepotism, disregard for constitutional laws, vote buying, snatching of ballot boxes, examination malpractices, and money laundry, just to mention a few.

Boris Begovic (2005) classifies corruption into different types which include;

- Judicial corruption
- Commercial corruption
- Political corruption
- Central government corruption
- Local government corruption (p.5)

From all the above listed, it is discovered that all are predominant in Nigeria's situation. But for this paper, attention is based on central government corruption and how citizens have also contributed to the nursing and growth of the deadly act. This is crucial because this type of corruption deals with the government and the citizens. It is the center string that aligns or services the other arms like the judicial, economic, political, or social. The government has the responsibility to put a halt to any corrupt practices, but in a situation where they fail to put a check on it, the citizens capitalize on that weakness to perpetrate their corrupt practices.

Nigerian Drama and Corruption

Discussion on the term “corruption” cannot be exhausted because the Nigerian human has grown to invest so much concern and interest in individual and personal interest at the detriment of the nation whereby the urge to achieve immediate goals is paramount in his mind. In like manner, the playwright is restlessly inexhaustive in replicating such in writing. In light of this innovation, playwrights like Ola Rotimi in his play *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977), satirizes the prevailing situation of corruption and leadership failure. The play presents an ex-military man who knows nothing about politics but, because he wants to share from the national “chi-chin”, he blindly dabbles into politics. Lejoka Brown symbolizes some figures in the country; a military figure who leaves military office to head the civilians. He is a perfect symbol of politicians who dabble in politics for selfish reasons to the detriment of society. Wole Soyinka's *The Road* (1965) also projects corruption in society in the character of Professor who engages in the illicit selling of “Aksident spare parts” thereby making unimaginable money. Another character Joe, despite being a law enforcement agent, is not left out of the corrupt practices as he collects bribes from Professor. This is part of the reasons why Adekunle & Samuel (2018) conclude that corruption thrives in societies where there is total disregard for logical procedures, and where critical thinking is neglected to mere academic exercise. It is therefore not out of place to state that corruption has gradually metamorphosed into popular culture and norms in the present society.

Uwem (2018) in his submission defines literature as a reflection of life; a mirror, held up by the literary artist for society to see its reflection; and for society to see itself in. In like manner, drama is regarded and remains an imitation of life. It is a means by which Playwrights portray or replicate events that happen in society. Writers have always expressed their opinions in writing through poetry, prose, and plays. Such expressions can be corrective, informative, provocative, or even a protest.

It is also seamless to state here that the nature and level of corruption that is presently ravaging society can be ascribed to the individualistic way of life imbibed by people since community life has been jettisoned. This is a truism because, in the present dispensation, there is an existence of high personal or individualistic interest: “all about me”, - individualism. There is a disconnect from the communal way of what is associated with the African setting which breeds unity, love, and concern for the next man standing. As a result of this disconnect, there now exists so many atrocities committed for the concern of the “self”, which is individualistic and selfish. No more “us”, which is communal. The African chord of communal existence has been broken; therefore, trust has eluded society. This has degenerated into individuals trying at all costs, to acquire wealth meant for the populace to himself or ensure that he retains power at all costs. In the process, so many atrocities are committed; ranging from sacrificing human beings for rituals to siphoning of funds and money laundering; from snatching of ballot boxes to manipulation of figures after voting; and from nepotism to embezzling funds meant for community projects.

Rotimi tactfully presents different categories of corrupt practices as prominent in *If...*(2008) (The Tragedy of the Ruled) where Betty is fond of sabotaging the efforts of her co-tenants to gain favour from the Landlord, and the Landlord exploits his tenants by increasing house rent at will. He also forces them to vote for him. Betty is part of the oppressed and exploited, but because of selfish interest, she tries to intimate the Landlord with every plan and decision taken by the tenants. So, she falls into the category of the poor oppressing the poor. Landlord on his part is a case of the highly placed using his position to enrich himself. Although his tenants refuse to vote for him, he still wins the election. This is the highest level of political corruption where

political officeholders buy their way into power whether or not they are qualified. Such practices have continued to plunder society into bad shape. That summarizes Rotimi's submission in *If...* that "we cannot build a nation on a foundation of individual self-preservation!" From all the above, it is important to note that drama has been a very symbolic tool in addressing the issue of corruption in the past and present society. Plays like *Harvest of Corruption* (2005) by Frank Ogodo-Ogbeche bring to the limelight so many atrocities being perpetrated in present society such as drug trafficking borne out of unemployment, and bribery as displayed by Ayo. This is an indication that corruption is practiced by both the ruled and the ruler. Playwrights can be well categorized as soothsayers because, most often, their plays consciously or unconsciously translate into reality. The scenario of the Chief of Staff stealing a sum of \$2.16 meant for arms purchase presented by Ogbeche can be likened to news that sounded like fiction when news had it that a snake swallowed a whopping sum of N36m, being proceeds made from sales of scratch cards for Jamb forms (*Vanguard Newspaper*.2018). As Nigerians were trying to wake up from the aberration, *The Guardian Newspaper* (June 14th, 2019) reported how a Gorilla was accused of swallowing N6.7m in a zoological garden in Kano State, Nigeria. Confirming the incident, The Managing Director of the Zoo to BBC Pidgin that the issue is under investigation while The Police spokesman also confirmed that the arrest of 10 people has been made in connection with the case. The question now arises, when have animals started eating physical cash? Although, no further news had been heard to confirm the veracity of the claims the fact remains that as crucial as these allegations may sound, they only hurt the ears of the poor/masses and nothing more. In cases of this nature, the playwright stands as the main voice of the masses, to speak out in writing by satirizing such deeds.

Existential situation in the selected plays

Research on the plays of Esiaba Irobi shows that reviews have been made in many aspects. Stephen E. Inegbe and Bassey Rebecca (2020) noted that the dramatist employed a macabre language or language of violence while Ifediora Okiche (1996) examined the dramatist's constant use of "image of death, blood, and violence", but the existential perspective has not been

reviewed. In light of this, this paper aims to interrogate the existential tenets in the selected plays and how the existential crises contribute to promoting corruption or otherwise in the nation. Since existentialism as mentioned earlier deals with man and existence, it is pertinent to state that citizens (leaders and ruled, poor and rich) are responsible for whatever they are. This synchronizes Jean-Paul Sartre's (1973) submission that;

Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count on no one but himself that he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets for himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this earth (284).

The above is an indication that man should not wait for any supernatural power or forces, just as Nwokedi says;

Mrs Nwokedi: Nwokedi, listen to me. If you kill him now, what will you gain? You'll only increase the funeral toll in this family. Son, leave vengeance to God.
Nwokedi: I will not. I will never (strains)
Mrs Nwokedi: God will act on our behalf.
Nwokedi: Why hasn't God acted these six months?
Mrs Nwokedi: He is taking His time, Nwokedi. God is neither rash nor foolish. Look, if it is true that Arikpo murdered your sister and her three children, God will unleash the twelve plagues of Egypt on him.
Nwokedi: (at arms) Mother, I will not wait for God...
Mrs Nwokedi: Why, Nwokedi!
Nwokedi: Because when a man waits for God to act and God does not act, man takes up the role of God and act...

The above assertion is in line with Sartre's argument that in making choices for ourselves and assuming full responsibility for our actions, we are also choosing an image of what we expect everybody to be. That is why Mazeli expresses disappointment

over his friend and schoolmate, Lawani. He wants Lawani to also maintain the burning fire of sanitizing the society. The society also contributes to the existential crises which have invariably constituted the bulk of corrupt practices. Everybody is aspiring to become rich and famous as seen in *Nwokedi*. Chief Arikpo wants to remain in power to enjoy all the benefits attached to that seat, hence he engages in unimaginable acts. The dramatist can expose such related corrupt practices and their impact on society. He goes further to establish the existential crises dominant in them.

Synopsis of the selected plays

Cemetery Road is a multi-dimensional play that taps into several aspects. It is poetic, dramatic, and historic. The play features a character, Mazelli, a Director, who gets killed by his childhood friend as a result of his refusal to release a recorded tape that contains a play that he directs. His refusal is a result of fear of distortion by the BBC correspondent. Not minding what happens to him despite his attack on the ruling government, he goes about his normal business until he is sheepishly arrested and injected with lethal poison. The play opens with a funeral glee which indicates the burial activities of Mazelli. *Cemetery Road* cannot be pinned down to one plot because it addresses so many issues ranging from oppression as displayed by Professor, to total disappointment in a childhood friend who cannot stand by his words.

Nwokedi features the Igbo cultural festival which is normally celebrated annually. In the olden days, this festival was celebrated using human blood, but Christianity and modernization have caused the eradication of the usage of human blood and adopted the use of animal blood. But *Nwokedi Junior*, the person whose turn is to perform the rite wishes that human blood must be used for the sacrifice to attain the originality of the sacrifice. His wish came to pass as he murdered his father on the festival day.

Analysis of corruption in the selected plays

Irobi as best classified as a new Nigerian playwright by Raji (2014) has shown his versatility in theatrical knowledge. His play *Cemetery Road* starts with the end of the play, telling what transpires that leads to the death of Mazeli, the lead character of the play. As stated earlier, the play can be viewed from several

perspectives. For this paper, Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* and *Cemetery Road* are analyzed to showcase how the playwright can portray corruption as a vice and a negative impact on Nigeria's economy. Character analysis is embarked upon to achieve this goal. The role of Lawani, the State Security Officer, and Madubunjoala, a Professor of Drama are perfect examples of elements of corruption used by the playwright to drive home his idea. Lawani happens to be Mazeli's bosom friend and schoolmate. Back in school days, the duo shared the same ideology; fighting for the emancipation of the downtrodden. They both vowed to fight injustice to a halt. But, to Mazeli's greatest shock, Lawani works as a State Security Officer for the government which he once criticized. Working as a State Security Officer is not bad, but, he also works as a spy for the British Government. However, what baffles Mazeli and Somadina is that Lawani can stoop so low as to be engaged in spying on his country for the British government. This act, he confirms makes him rich beyond expectation in his conversation with Somadina thus;

- Somadina: (*looking at the statements*) How did you make all this money?
- Lawani: Well, as the Chief Security Officer to the President, I have access to all the secrets of the Military Council. Their day-to-day delivery-rations. So when the C.I.A. and M16 approached me and asked me if I could be their agent. I knew something big was coming. These are my identity cards for both the C.I.A. and M16 (*puts them in front of her*)
- Somadina: So, what do you do for them?
- Lawani: Something simple. Every evening I collect all the official documents-meets at the President's table and faxes them straight to the C.I.A. office, to their headquarters in the U.S.A. and to M16 head office in London. And for that simple job, I pick up 5000 euros every week paid in hard cash, pounds sterling, into this account in London. (*Takes and displays the bank statement*) The Americans are characteristically more generous. They pay me

15,000 every week in dollars! ...(*Cemetery Road*
p.88)

The playwright presents two characters; Lawani and Mazeli who nurse the same ideology but, existential crises result in diverse ends. Lawani cannot sustain his ambition of fighting injustice because he needs money to take care of his ailing father and he is left with no other option than to take up the appointment with the same class of people he once castigated. Lawani cannot keep to his initial urge to fight injustice, instead, he joins in the act of injustice because of the financial attachment. The above type of corrupt act is more dangerous as it puts the entire country at security risk. Though dangerous, Lawani undermines the danger due to selfish interests, as he only focuses on the financial benefits.

Mazeli is the opposite of Lawani as he stands his ground to fight injustice to the end. To achieve that, he advocates for the emancipation of the common man using his career as a university lecturer in drama to direct plays that showcase societal happenings. In a nutshell, Mazeli lays his life for the course of his country. He has a choice to toe the line of Lawani but, the consciousness of his goal to uphold his will remains in him. The role of Lawani therefore depicts that, corruption is not only a governmental crisis but also an act embarked upon by members of the community.

Another corrupt character can be seen in Professor Madubunjoala. He represents the highly placed and educated but engages in sex scandals with students and staff of the institution; a role that depicts 'sex for marks' cases. He is a tyrant who will never want his subordinates to rise in their career. He exhibits this threat when he refuses to process Mazeli's promotion papers. All these are matters that affect the productivity of the human force which in turn affect the economy of a nation. That is why James Chen posits that;

Corruption is a form of dishonest behavior that has a big impact on everyone. It occurs when an entrusted entity abuses its position of power for its benefit. Corruption can come in many forms including bribes, double-dealing, and fraud by individuals, businesses, and government. (2022)

More sternly, corruption in its smallest form can be defined as an act of dishonesty or a conduct that is fraudulent as displayed by Professor Madubunjoala and Lawani.

The play *Nwokedi* presents the fraudulent politicians in the person of Senator Arikpo who uses his wife and children for rituals to be able to retain his political position and lies that they were burnt with his house. This paper therefore interrogates the ease with which these actions are being carried out. As a politician, he cannot fulfill his promises to the masses during the campaign but still seeks their trust, and sees nothing wrong with his inability to fulfill his promises;

Arikpo: But why? Why? Am I the only politician who
promised his people water and light and roads and
didn't fulfil his promises? Am I the only one?
Mrs Nwokedi: You are not the only one. Nwokedi's father also
promised these young men jobs before they voted
for him four years ago. But he didn't fulfill his
promises...(Nwokedi p.8)

From the above conversation, it is deduced that it is a common practice among politicians, whether at the federal, state, or local level to make promises to get the people's votes after which they renege on their campaign promises. All these are politically inclined corrupt practices that reoccur during electioneering seasons. Also, during the electioneering period, there exists an atmosphere of high expectations from people in different forms; some are eager to collect either cash or material needs before casting votes the highest bidder gets their votes. With this, the candidate who is eager to win the election would certainly be ready to pay any amount to be shared among the electorates. In other words, both the electorates and the electioneers are guilty of corruption. To a great extent, this act as an arm of corruption has affected the development of the country, because corruption is an impediment to economic development in all ramifications.

Irobi as a playwright, uses his art to project the magnitude of crimes that people indulge in, either to get rich or retain power with levity. On this premise, therefore, there emanates the question: Is corruption a popular culture or a norm?

Existentialist Perspective

Existentialism is a philosophy that revolves around man and his existence. It is important to state that the characters of Irobi are created in the world and environment and they must bear all responsibilities it showers on them. This is to affirm the submission of Jean-Paul Sartre that existentialism puts every man in possession of himself and he places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his shoulders. Mazeli, being a patriot of his country has no control of everything that transpired, he only tries to execute his power of freedom to choose to be patriotic and carry the responsibilities heaped upon him by the society he finds himself. In like manner, his strong will to remain patriotic causes the existential crisis he finds himself in, hence, being murdered by his close friend Lawani who, on his part, chooses to jettison patriotism. Coker (2013) explicates that;

Existentialism is situated as a viable theoretical paradigm that portends fresh engagement trend in the third-generation of Nigerian literature. Conceptually, therefore, existentialism as an attitude of revolt that is chiefly rooted in humanistic perception of inhabiting an irrational universe, where forging ahead entails making choices to attain self-realization (103).

This essay conceives the notion that corruption is innate in man but, man is also disposed to choosing to be corrupt or not; that is an individual choice determined by existential situation as well presented by the dramatist. However, it is humanly possible to avert corruption because it is one's choice to be corrupt. It is also pertinent to note that corruption is an act that can be involved by any person, whether highly placed or not, whether the ruler or the ruled. The lowly placed (the poor) are more exposed and vulnerable to corruption and have contributed immensely to its sustainability. However, corrupt practices have so much affected the country negatively that corruption itself is no longer perceived as a vice in some societies.

This paper strongly concludes with Adekunle & Samuel's (2018) position that corruption thrives in societies where there is total disregard for logical procedures, and where critical thinking is neglected to mere academic exercise. Hence, in Nigeria

therefore, it is also important to state that corruption has gradually metamorphosed into popular culture.

The death of Mezali cannot be outrightly ascribed to failure but is symbolic in meaning. Irobi's sense of continuity in existence is well displayed in Somadina's yet-unborn baby. It is an indication that there is a rising hope for the nation. It is a take from Soyinka's perception of transition in the Yoruba mystical world as well enumerated by Mosobalaje (2013) that; there are three levels of existence: the world of the living, the dead, and that of the unborn. Most importantly, the challenges faced by Mezali equate with Coker's perception when he posits that; the fact that characters face tough choices in moving ahead actually shows that no success is achieved in the theatre of life without some form of denial and indeed positive self-assertion (106).

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131 *Corruption in Nigeria, Popular Culture or Norm: A Reading of Irobi's Cemetery Road (2009) and Nwokedi (1991)*

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