

# THE WRITER AS A PROPHETIC INTERVENTIONIST: THE CHINYELU OJUKWU'S AND SUNDAY ABRAYE'S EXAMPLES

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## Abstract

Ethnic and religious conceit have continued to impinge on the unity of heterogeneous Nigeria from the colonial to the post-colonial eras, necessitating the need for creative artists' interventions. The interventive writings are rarely explored in Nigerian scholarship. Two playwrights of Nigerian descent, Chinyelu Florence Ojukwu in *Memories and Vision* and Sunday Abraye in *Hurdles* are a few who have risen to this interventionist role. This essay, therefore, examines the two dramatic texts as prophetic attempts at advocating an inextricable ethno-religious bond in the country. In both texts, the heterogeneous constitution of the Nigerian nation and the crises often instigated by ethnic and or religious mix are configured as mixed marriages and the resistance against them. The major characters in both texts are symbolic of old and new generations of Nigerians - the old generation is emblematic of Nigerians with ethno-religious egotism from which the playwrights prophetically advocate a departure.

**Keywords:** Ethno-religious Crisis, heterogeneous, Ethnic-bigotry

## Introduction

Ethnocentrism and religion are twin `major issues that constantly menace the corporate existence of the Nigerian state with over four hundred ethnic groups and two major religions, besides the African traditional religion. These two issues, from the colonial to the

post-colonial years, have enduringly engendered ethnic cleavages that seem impossible to thread together as the nationals exhibit fidelity far more to their distinct ethnic groups and their dissimilar religions than they do to the nation. The strings of loyalty to their different ethnic groups and religions are further reinforced by the consequential ethno-religious superciliousness which fosters the exaltation of one ethnic or religious group over others and the discrimination of other(s). Those who belong to the same ethnic or religious group see themselves as superior or relate with those outside it with distrust. The prejudice resulting from the exclusion of other (s), as demonstrated by the different ethno-religious groups, has continued to hamper blissful relationships grossly, sometimes provoking ethnic or religious crises.

These crises occur because, rather than seeing the heterogeneity of the country as a boon, the nationals see it as a bane because of their ethnic bias. Some haul their prejudice into conjugal relationships with the different ethnic groups as they stiffly resist mixed-marriages of their children and wards, thereby further widening the cleavages.

Existential divisions such as the above seem remediable only through a rethink that will birth attitudinal change. The attempts to proffer solution to social challenges such as the one mentioned here and others have got scientists and social scientists in every century burrowing into the depth of the historical past, illuminating the core of the present existence and x-raying the nebulous future. The role of the imaginative artiste in these engagements is seldom perceived. Some imaginative writers in their engagements however transcend the material past and present, foreshadowing the future in their texts, thus earning for themselves the togas of prophets.

The prophetic tag on the creative artists was first associated with poets in far much earlier centuries. Edward Pollard (327) traces its roots to the primitive society connected with the primacy of the spoken word. Examining traditional Hebrew society, Pollard saw the prophets

doubling as poets. Pollard's position in relation to bucolic society and the poet-prophet is also true for traditional African priests who also manifest poetic deftness during ritualistic performances. What threads both poet and prophet together, Pollard reveals, are inspiration and truth (327) that are derived from the goddess, Muse, making the poets "prophets of Muse" (328). The intercourse between the goddess and the poet, Haruna Penni reveals, had earlier been vocalized by Plato who saw poets as prophets influenced by the goddess Muse (par 1). The interlace between the Muse and the poet is not however an experience common to all as William Wordsworth (quoted in Penni par 2) sees prophetic writing as a rare providential gift bestowed on a privileged few.

The rare prophetic bequest associated first with the poetic genre in the spoken form in pastoral society is discernible in the latter genres of prose fiction and drama in literate society. The validity of the prophetic tag however hinges essentially on the existence of the two elements of "truth" and "inspiration" that Pollard (328) has identified as crocheting the poet and prophet together. The litmus test for the two elements in an imaginative writer is the fulfilment of the prophecy enunciated in his or her creative text. A few writers over the ages have scaled through the litmus test, the quintessence of whom are George Orwell and Achebe. In their respective texts, *Animal Farm* and *Man of the People*, they presaged the ephemerality of the former Soviet Union's socialist experiment and Nigeria's first democratic attempt. The Clairvoyance of Wole Soyinka's in *Dance of the Forest* and Salmon Rushdie's in *Midnight Children* cannot be glossed over. Soyinka and Rushdie in their texts adumbrated the post-independence debacles in their separate erstwhile colonized countries of Nigeria and India.

All four authors mentioned above in their different texts foretold the insipid end of their nations. This could lure one into the snare of thinking that literary prophecy is all about doom. This certainly

is not correct as some imaginative writers in their texts have also fantasized about the positive. Essentially, whichever forms the prophecies take – negative, positive, fulfilled or unfulfilled – they function as parts of what compass society. Albeit the Marxist ideology is seemingly utopic today, Ngugi’s writing, like others, envisages a classless society in Africa. On the contrary, in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Walker’s text, which visualizes the equality between the genders in a patriarchal Black society in America, seems to have achieved the intended vision as it has helped to positively shape gender relations in the society; making her a purveyor of a good prophecy.

The dramatic texts of Chinyelu Ojukwu and Sunday Abraye are scripted in the direction of prophecy as they envision a new Nigeria with a seamless ethnic fusion; thus, earning for themselves the prophet’s cloaks. In both texts, marriage is configured as a metaphor for the true national unity in heterogeneity. The two texts by female and male playwrights are flavoured by feminist aesthetics, but of significance to this paper is a similar prophetic element that laces the two plays. The dose of prophecy in both texts functions dually as an advocacy and a prophecy – an advocacy against ethno-religion-induced divisions, and a prophecy about a seamless national unity.

Although Ojukwu’s text has been available for a few years now, and Abraye’s quite recent, both texts have yet to generate critical responses that are visible in the cyberspace or in print to serve as scholarly references. The texts address a national fundamental – the advocacy for the inextricable stitching together of heterogeneous Nigeria. On the surface, the texts make subtle iconoclastic attempts at unsettling the extant ethno-religious conceit that impinges on the unity of the nation. A deeper read of the texts unfurls a prophecy and advocacy for a seamless unity of the different ethno-religious groups that constitute the Nigerian nation. The prophetic vision becomes much more topical in nature and urgent in its fulfilment given very

recent happenings such as the immediate past national and states elections – conducted in the country, precisely between February and April 2023 and the attendant crises. Of particular note in the elections are those of the presidential and governorship in Lagos State that were seriously flawed by violence catalysed by ethnic sentiments. Both playwrights may have been stimulated by such existential challenges of the nation, Nigeria, to negotiate in their respective texts a blissful future for the country. Significantly, while the two texts with different dramaturgy – one filmic and the other stage-centred – dwell on ethno-religious suspicion, one goes further to incorporate the vanity of class discrimination. These issues in the two texts shall be examined in turn in this essay.

### **Ethnocentric Marriages and the Menace on National Unity**

The interactions of the characters in the two texts portray the strong ethno-religious chauvinism exhibited by Nigerians as mindless as the emotional well-being of the people is subordinated to ethnic or religious interests. This is illustrated in Ojukwu's *Memories and Vision* where Nneka and Onome's desire for a pleasurable conjugal relationship is smothered by ethnic distrust. The duo are young sexual partners from the same Southern part of Nigeria, but of distinct ethnic nationalities – Nneka an Igbo, from the Eastern part and Onome, an Urhobo, from the South-South of the country.

The pair, who has been in a romantic relationship unblemished for four years even by tiffs, decides to celebrate the feat with friends symbolically drawn from the different parts of the country. The euphoria of the event is however abridged by the senseless dictates of ethnic pride as Nneka's mother, Mrs. Obi, talks her daughter into marrying Ifeanyi, an Igbo business mogul. In the mother's ethnically flawed and class-skewed thinking, the financial success of Ifeanyi and

his ethnic background loudly give him an edge over a struggling Onome as she angrily tells her daughter:

MRS OBI. It is time you forgot about this relationship of (sic) yours with Onome and faced reality. He has many problems to cope with and cannot pay your bride price. You don't have to be deceived by the fact that he had a party for you the other time. Why don't you get married to Ifeanyi now and be settled? He is comfortable and has the means to maintain you. He has the same cultural background with you (sic). What else do you want? (9)

Mrs. Obi's preference for a husband for her daughter evinces her as an ethnic bigot, who driven also by materialism, is callous about the fundamental place of mutual love in a marital relationship. Into this angle of reasoning her daughter, Nneka, tries to get her:

NNEKA. Mother, what matters in a marriage is love.

If there is love, every other thing is secondary. I still believe I would be happy if I got married to Onome (9).

Discernible in the dialogue between mother and daughter is an ethnic disjunction even among people who occupy the same region of the country, indicating a nation that is greatly polarized on ethnic lines. The ethnic polarity seems stronger than that of religion and class. Ojukwu's and Abraye's clairvoyant lenses, however, see beyond these dividing lines as they attempt to unsettle the status quo in their respective texts.

The attitude of Mrs Obi towards the love life of her daughter is not a peculiarity of the female gender; the male gender is also culpable. The fathers of the major female characters in Abraye's *Hurdles*. Boubeni, the father of Ebiarede and Kigha, the father of Demien both stand against their individual daughters' relationships with young men

of different ethnic groups or social strata. While Kigha's opposition is class-centred, Boubeni's is ethnically biased. Both have negative implications for the unity of the family and society at large and this is visible, particularly in the case of Boubeni and Kigha's relationship. The two fathers, who are of two brotherly neighbouring Ijo villages, come into a frosty relationship, to the extent that one of them invites the police to arrest the other over the sensual relationship between their young male and female children, Doudou and Demien, during their last days in secondary school.

The class conceit on the part of a literate and comparatively village middle-class Kigha, is the singular reason for his earlier austere objection to the carnal relationship between Demien, his daughter, and Doudou, the son of an illiterate farmer couple – a relationship that later snowballs into a marriage. He, like Mrs Obi in Ojukwu's play, exhibits insensitivity to the emotional constitution of his daughter, Demien. Beyond the emotional attachment, she also greatly benefits intellectually from Doudou – a thing the father is ignorant of as she bares her mind to her angry parents:

DEMIEN. Let me make it clear to both of you in this house. I know what I want it and why I want it. I cannot relate with those loafers in this village both of you call children of high class. Doudou is good for me, he has a great future and we are deeply in love. (42)

A part of the daughter's statement reveals him not only as a father who is too blinkered by his class pride to discern her immediate present benefits from Doudou; it also unveils him as one who cannot foresee the possibility of the future economic uplift of Doudou which will be of immense benefits to him as well. The father, Kigha, is emblematic of the extant Nigerian parents with smoggy tribal lenses that prevent them from seeing the immediate and future benefits of the

existing ethnic mix. In contrast, teenage Demien is representative of the envisioned new Nigerians, who free from prejudicial lenses, can through the opaque future. The efficacy of the contrasting panoramic view of the new Nigerians is validated later in the text by Doudou's post-graduation success by dint of luck, underscoring the symbolic myopia and the irrationality of the father and his age vis-à-vis class and or tribal consciousness.

### **Ethnic Prejudice and the Neglect of Inter-dependence Benefits**

It is instructive to note that despite her parents' objection to her relationship with Doudou, Demien, benefits from the intellectual prowess of the latter who in turn benefits from the former's financial comfort as she helps to pay his WAEC fees. The parents' blindness is metaphoric of the sightlessness of the older generation of Nigerians about the gains of heterogeneity. In Abraye's text, but for her, Doudou would not have had money to register for his final exams. Obvious in this therefore is the profit of interdependence that the interface of different classes generates. This finds expression in the dialogue between Doudou and Demien where raw strength, intellectual prowess, and money become mutually beneficial as the former expresses his determination to deploy his raw strength to raise money for his final year examination fees:

DEMIE. Do not worry yourself about enrolment. It will be taken care of. What matters is how best we are to prepare towards getting a good result of the examinations.

DOUDOU. What do you intend to do now? Please whatever you are planning to do, do not stress yourself on account of me. I think I am strong enough to work and raise money.



DEMIEN. What you do not seem to understand is that, your strength is needed by the entire class to enable to us pass well in the forthcoming examination, and not to be wasted on whatever manual job you intend to do. (29-30)

The dialogue reveals two people of disproportionate economic backgrounds threaded together by genuine mutual love and care. What is also instructive about the inter-dependence is the complexity of life that naturally prompts the mix of class, ethnic, and religious groups. It is paradoxical that on the one hand, Demien, who has money, is knowledge deficient. On the other hand, Doudou, who has brains, is financially destitute. The weaknesses and strengths of the two youngsters are however skilfully merged for the mutual benefit of both. This is symbolic of the possibility of Nigeria gaining from the present mishmash of ethnic-religious groups and classes. The playwright strikes the balance in the uneven relationship of the two youths to underline his prophetic vision for Nigeria.

Unfortunately, while the younger generation perceives and exploits the benefits of the class and ethnic conflation, the older generation represented by the parents, particularly Demien's, is too blindfolded by class conceit to appreciate the values of the ethno-religious and class blend. Through the paralleling of the two different generations and aligning with the younger generation, the playwright also subverts the supposed superiority of the wisdom of the older generation, particularly when it is fogged by ethnic sentiments.

Demien's prescience, therefore, is a part of the playwright's prophetic vision to remediate pointless crises provoked by narrow-mindedness. This artistic remediation of ethnic crisis by the playwright is evocative of the opinion of Lanre Bamide that in crisis laden society, the literary artist cannot 'keep silent when all around him he hears society requiring that in its hour of crisis all of its elements should

justify themselves by their works' (28). This point is accentuated in the text by the eventual marriage of the two youngsters in the later part of the play.

Their marriage is figurative of the eventual triumph of the new order over the existing order – the eventual death of ethno-religious intolerance for the flourishing of borderless unity. The tenacity of their love for each other amid seemingly inflexible disapproval and the eventual succumbing to their desire serve as a further prop of the artistic vision of the writer and this is the major strength of the prognostic aesthetics in the text.

### **Opposition, familial Dissonance, and psychosocial Disequilibrium**

The opposition of the older generation smacks of familial and psycho discord – unfortunately the older generation is not able to perceive this. These experiences are explored in both texts respectively. In Abraye's *Hurdles*, familial dissonance is demonstrated in the resistance of Demien's parents and her rebuttal of her father's allegation against Doudou at the police station that the Doudou had attempted to rape her. Benumbed by class consciousness, the parents are not able to sense the disunity provoked by their narrow-mindedness. The diminuendo of Kigha's family's conflict begins from the day he questions his daughter's relationship with Doudou and reaches its crescendo through Demien's arrival in the police station to repudiate the rape charge. Her confutation only exposes the familial disunity to the public. The father seems to realize the crack in his family only after feeling disconcerted by his daughter's actions. No wonder that without hesitation he accepts to settle the matter out of court as suggested by the police.

It is paradoxical that in the same text, the same ethnocentrism is displayed by Doudou's father, Boubeni, who with his son had earlier suffered victimhood of class discrimination. This speaks of ethnic

arrogance as a boundless web twinning the various classes of Nigerians – the rich and the poor, victims and agents of class or ethnic discrimination are all culpable. Boubeni manifests this trait when his daughter, Ebiarede, is reported to be in a relationship with Adamu, a Northerner. To the former, it is an anathema for his daughter to enter into such a sensual relationship, not to talk of marriage; hence he vehemently opposes his daughter's maiden visit to his abode to introduce her lover and intended husband, Adamu. How quickly Boubeni forgets his victimhood of the class-consciousness is comical and demonstrative to an extent of the working of a blinkered heart – it easily forgets itself and accuses others of what itself is guilty. Worthy of note is that the stiff resistance also instigates a family distrust as he becomes embittered with his brother, who supports the inter-union between Ebiaride and Adamu.

Similarly, in Ojukwu's *Memories and Vision* Mrs Obi ethnic bias freezes her emotions as she is cataleptic of the trauma into which her daughter and her partner will be flung. Onome, the symbol of the victims of ethnic politics in Nigeria, is hurled into a state of psychosocial disequilibrium as he crosses a road without looking and he is knocked down by an oncoming vehicle. Nneka on her part, although married to her mother's chosen husband, Ifeanyi, is not spared the trauma engendered by her unconscionable ditching of Onome. The news of her former lover's accident also tosses her into delirium as she visits him in the hospital in her dream to apologize for her action. She admits her fault saying:

NNEKA. ...Please Onome, forgive me. I'm sorry about all that happened. I was confused ...I had no alternative, ... considering the circumstances... I ...feel guilty ... I feel I am the cause of what happened to you. Will you forgive me? (45- 46)

The admission of guilt by Nneka holds only an iota of the entire truth that the mother's ethnocentrism is largely culpable for the trauma of her daughter and the mental dissonance of Onome.

It is noteworthy that discriminatory acts such as those perpetrated by the characters against one another only make taut the weak thread of unity among the people of the nation. Both playwrights however proffer prophetic solutions through the redirecting of the actions of their respective characters as shall be examined below.

### **Prophesying a seamless ethnic Fusion through Marriage**

Brecht, as quoted in Bamidele (33), is of the view that art should transcend the mere reflection of social reality to catalyse a change. Niyi Osundare, writing on the committed role of the African writer, is more explicit when he says:

‘... the writer by virtue of his ability to transcend quotidian reality, has a duty to relate not only how things are, but how they could or should be. He must not only lead the people to the mountaintop and point out the way to the Promised Land; he must also show the people how to get there’ (12).

Ojukwu and Abraye in their texts do not only take the reader to the ‘mountain top,’ but also reveal prophetic visions to stimulate changes – alternatives to ethnic and class bigotry or discrimination. By offering solutions through the plays, the playwrights demonstrate a socialist vision that arts should be deployed to solve social ills, thus negating the “art for art’s sake” contestation of formalist literary scholars. In *Visions and Memories*, Ojukwu is not frontal in her condemnation of the age-long ethnic bias in conjugal relationship but exposes its evil by beaming her light on the after-wedding life of Nneka and her Igbo husband, Ifeanyi.

The evils associated with Nneka's kind of marriage begin to unfold immediately after the pomp and pageantry of the wedding. Nneka gets her first baptism of marital horrors in a hotel room during their honeymoon abroad. Nneka, who for three years never had even a tiff with Onome, gets a parallel experience from her newly-wedded husband, Ifeanyi, who slaps her in the face for a trivial act of carrying along with her a birthday gift from Onome. Ifeanyi, as she rightly points to him, fails to understand that it is not easy to quickly excise memories of her immediate past romantic relationship with Onome as she tells him "You know very well that I had known him long before I met you. Should I have thrown all his presents away? Above all, you know how you found me (30). Ifeanyi's action, like his mother-in-law and co-traveller, Mrs Obi, in the same boat of tribalism, demonstrates gross insensitivity to the emotional state of his wife, Nneka.

His attitude toward the wife is not inadvertent and is sustained all through the few years of their marriage. Ifeanyi is not often available to provide his wife the emotional comfort she needs even at trying moments of her life. While he provides her material comfort as his mother-in-law expects, in the guise of going on business trips, he leaves her and her new-born baby at home and goes frolicking with his girlfriend in hotels in the northern part of the country. Through this portrayal of Nneka's marital challenges, the playwright underlines the unsavoriness of such a union erected on ethnically slanted parental choices. Thus, the playwright is subtly critical of such a union and she does this through the paralleling of Nneka and Ifeanyi's marriage to those of Onome and Bisi's, and Musa and Shade's. These characters are less financially endowed than Ifeanyi, yet their marriages are peaceful and successful despite theirs being fusions of people of different ethnic backgrounds in Nigeria - Onome, an Urhobo in the South-South and Bisi, a Yoruba in the South West. and Musa from the North with Shade from the South West.

The success of these marriages in contrast to Nneka and Ifeanyi's becomes the basis for the playwright, Ojukwu's advocacy for and prophecy about a true unity among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. This position of Ojukwu is akin to Abreye's in *Hurdles* where he makes similar advocacy and prophecy subtly through a positive change of attitude of Boubeni, the father of Ebiarede – from a stiff resistance to her desire to marry Adamu, a Northerner, to an acceptance. Boubeni's maiden resistance propped by ethnic bigotry is soon proven wrong after marriage when Adamu turns out to be a blessing to his family. Through his assistance, Doudou, Ebiarede's younger brother becomes university-educated, later gets a good job, and gets married to Demien, his secondary school love. It is noteworthy that Adamu is the one who funds the wedding of the duo when Doudou expresses his financial incapability.

Adamu's unexpected benevolence to the family of his Southern wife highlights the playwright's alternative, the thrust of his prophetic vision on the possibility of a new Nigeria where ethnic pride will not be the basis of interactions among the heterogeneous groups. The blissfulness of the marriage of the two people of ethno-geographical divide accentuates the anticipated ecstatic conflation of the diverse ethnic groups.

## **Conclusion**

Both playwrights, albeit dissimilar in their dramaturgies are analogous in their presentation of the same issue of familial and social crises generated by the ethno-religious mix, and the paralleling of their characters. In both texts, the heterogeneous constitution of the Nigerian nation and the crises often instigated by the ethnic and or religious mix are configured as a mixed marriage and the resistance against it. Rather than exploiting the benefits (particularly of mutual dependence) derivable from the hotchpotch of cultures and religions,

Nigerians engage in unsavoury discrimination, fuelling avoidable familial and national crises. The major characters in both texts are symbolic of old and new generations of Nigerians – the old generation is emblematic of Nigerians with ethno-religious egotism from which the playwrights prophetically advocate a departure. The resistance to the prejudiced position of the new generation serves as the prophetic vision of the playwrights to inaugurate change in the country. The resistance to the new generation serves as an interrogation and a subversion of the sentimental reasoning of the older generation. The strengths of both plays exist essentially in the balancing of characters with differences in their strengths and weaknesses to underscore the benefit and the possibility of unity in diversity. Through these acts also, both playwrights etch themselves as prophets.

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