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From Change to Chance: An Evaluation of Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* and Akanji Nasiru's *The Rally as Topical*

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Abstract

African literatures have been overwhelmingly influenced by politics and this is enough to make the readers believe that they have been provoked and produced by the same push factor that transformed the African continent. In this regard, writers have served not only as chroniclers of contemporary political history but also as campaigners of radical social change. Their works are unquestionably Afro-centric as they expose man's inhumanity to man since independence thereby projecting the course for cultural and national revolution. This paper however presents evidences of topical issues that are prevalent in most African countries particularly Nigeria since the exit of the colonial masters through four contemporary plays: Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* and Akanji Nasiru's *The Rally*. Using these plays, this paper is able to uncover the consequences of poor leadership and governance, religious and ethnic crisis, militancy, unemployment, politics, power, corruption, injustices and the like. As a result, the focal point of this paper is based on the social realities of Nigerian people and thereafter concludes that positive change is feasible if the youths can have a consensus by creating networks of resistance against recycled nefarious politicians, their constant gimmicks of oppression, and dehumanization.

Keywords: Afro-centric, Militancy, Change, Politics, Revolution, Topical

Introduction

Nicholas Rand Moschovakis (2006), describes topicality as that which has to do with a kind of meaning that presumes an

interpreter's familiarity with particular, publicly, reported events or controversies to which an imaginative work alludes more or less implicitly. The four plays under study,

namely; Amed Yerima's *Hard Ground and Odenigbo*. Akanji Nasiru's *The Rally* and Denja Abdullahi's *Dealth and the King's Grey Hair*, are topical because they have politics and power as their main thematic preoccupations, ranging from grass root politics to national politics and since Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981) asserts that, "every writer is a writer in politics but the only question is what and whose politics?" This paper certainly agrees with that assertion giving that the four plays expose the present situation of Nigeria, their thematic preoccupations are undeniably true. Themes such as; bad leadership from independence till date, injustices, marginalization of the minority groups, poverty, greed, corruption at different levels, selfishness on the part of our leaders, empty promises during election campaigns, incessant killings, tribal wars, kidnapping, poor medical facilities, poor infrastructure, lack of basic social amenities (water and electricity), hunger starvation class struggle and the like. These are obvious challenges facing majority of Nigerians and that is why they are topical and one cannot help but feel the reality in these plays. In as much as they are represented as "make-believe" to entertain the readers, the intentions of the writers are for these plays to also inform and educate the readers on the

social realities of the contemporary Nigerian society at the same time .

Thus, social realism is a movement that flourished during the interwar period; it is a style of art, fiction, movies and plays. It describes the daily life of workers and poor people. Social realist artists try to show people and their lives in a realistic way. This means that they often show things which are not beautiful or attractive, as the plays of; Yerima, Nasiru and Abdullahi. They depict the ills that are prevalent in Nigeria which would be examined subsequently. Social realism was popular in Russian art and literature. In the 20th century, it became the main type of literature in the Soviet Union where it depicts daily struggles of the people in the country. Narrowing it down to Africa and Nigeria in particular, such daily struggles such as: hunger, lack of water, oil spillage, poverty, death, incessant killings ethnic rivalry, religious crises and the like, are considered topical and these contemporary writers- Yerima, Nasiru and Abdullahi have exposed these topical issues in their various works both artistically and aesthetically.

Topicality in Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground*

According to *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*, 'topical means or has to do with matters of interest at the present time; dealing with current affairs. It also relates to a particular place or topic. For this reason, Yerima's *Hard Ground* addresses the Niger Delta problem since the discovery of oil in the mid-seventies and the subsequent environmental degradation. Here, violence has become the order of the day, the youths are on edge, restless and twitchy, hostages are taken and not to mention the politicians whose perpetual holding of talks aggravate rather than improve or revolutionize the situation. Therefore, it is topical and relevant to literature since literature is the only avenue that captures or documents human emotions and makes it available for a wider audience so as to create awareness on issues of the time. No wonder Ngugi (1997) notes that "a writer's subject matter is history: the process of a people acting on nature, changing it, and in so doing, acting on and changing themselves. The changing relation of production including power relations is a whole territory of concern to a writer. Politics, is hence part and parcel of this literary territory" (477). Also, Syl Cheney Coker (1981) added that, "the very existence

of the African writer is a political statement", and Niyi Osundare(2007) retorts, "he cannot help being committed". (8-9).

In the play- *Hard Ground*, all the events are assumed to have taken place in two days. The first day, one notices the tensed atmosphere in Baba's house as the family gathers around 18 year old Nimi to hear what happened at the camp because of the twenty people who were massacred. Nimi is assumed to be a member of a guerrilla youth movement like: "Niger People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Martyrs Brigade and others in that category who believe that their people are oppressed Nigeria" (37). These groups project themselves as saviours for the rest of the people and they are ready at any point to die for the common cause of bringing about better and improved standard of living to the people of the Niger Delta. In the play- *Hard Ground*, Nimi who is the only child of Baba and mama joins the struggle without considering how his parents would perceive it, especially as he is their only child. He (Nimi) tells the mother that, "Poverty Stinks" (13) he does not regret his actions since the ultimate aim is to better the lives of the people of Niger Delta and goes further to console the mother (13-14). Nimi's attitude to his mother shows how aggrieved and disenchanted the

youths and the children are, these are enough push factors for the youths and underage children to make up their minds to join the older ones in the struggle, hoping that the generation after them would not experience such disillusioned life. Above all, that the labour of the past heroes like Ken Saro-Wiwa would not go unrecognized (37).

Furthermore, the anger of the Niger Deltans towards Nigerian government is justifiable due to the environmental pollution caused by oil boom. Their main sources of livelihood which are farming and fishing have been taken over by oil spillage and illegal mining. Their sources of natural clean drinking water have been polluted by oil. There is high rate of poverty, hardship, illiteracy and unemployment. As a result, the people are left with no other choice than to resort to any means of survival while hoping that one day all these would be a thing of the past. In the play *Hard Ground*, Yerima is able to give a vivid description of how an average child in the Niger Delta switches on his or her survival and resistant instinct in the face of hunger, poverty and starvation in Nimi's words: ... "even as a child, you can smell and you quickly learn that nothing is free...even if it means killing another man to get been cakes, puff-puff or soap"(13) and one thing is sure, that if they lose their lives, for the cause,

it is six feet down the 'hard ground' (15). This goes to show how ready an average youth in the Niger Delta is, he is ready to use every means possible to fight against "domination and economic exploitation" by the government as Uduenna Nwafor- Orizu (2011) puts it. This particular situation can be likened to the Kenyan situation as depicted by Ngugi in his *Devil on the Cross*, where development is centered in the big cities. Here, the Niger Delta produces the oil that is used to enrich and develop the big cities like; Abuja and Lagos where the rich and powerful live. Nwafor –Orizu laments about this pattern of development and the consequences thus:

This state of affairs where all the good things of life are denied the poor has serious consequences on the whole continent. It arrests development while concentrating wealth in the hands of few. Incidentally, the few are the ones who do no work, who have not contributed meaningfully to the development of the country (79).

Amilcar Cabral (1980) writes on the consequences of dominating one's cultural life thus; "In fact, to take up arms to dominate

a people is, above all, to take up arms to destroy, or at least to neutralize and to paralyze their cultural life. For as long as part of that people can have a cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation. At a given moment, depending on internal and external factors determining the evolution of the society in question, cultural resistance (indestructible) may take on new (political, economic and armed) forms, in order to fully contest foreign domination” (484)

Ironically, the ‘hard ground’ which is the title of the play seems not to be hard anymore because it has been polluted by oil and the blood of the citizens who died along the struggle (15) and Nimi makes the reader to understand that the ‘hard ground’ is no more the way God made it (15) even as it is the main source of the country’s economy. Through Nimi’s eye, the reader is able to see and also feel the pain of the people of the Niger Delta though their militant step towards eradicating unjust treatment and domination by the government in their community is what is humanly unacceptable and this makes it topical. However, Yerima goes on to expose how the angry youths, kidnap, torture and gruesomely murder innocent citizens anytime they want to get the attention of the government due to the

countless empty promises to better their living condition. In Nimi’s words: “The boys caught him, and hacked him to death, removing his head from behind as he sped. In the wildness, my boys ran into the shrine, pulled out the second man”. (47)

At this juncture, the question is; how is it that our leaders are not ready to find a lasting solution to this menace? And to think that these militants are unperturbed because when asked, Nimi responds that “Whatever we did was for the good of the people (35). He further explains to Tonye that “Lasting peace in any human setting can only be achieved when there is justice” (38) and that “Breaking up the country is our next agenda” (39). Nimi goes on to add that “the best thing for Nigeria is a Federation of ethnic nationalities” (38).

Apparently, Yerima has successfully embedded the topical into literature, through this medium, non- Nigerians and the world at large can relate to the current issues plaguing Africa as as a whole but particularly, Nigeria. This gives credibility to the opinion of Chinua Achebe (1975) that “the African writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front”(45). Also, Chinyere Nwahunanya (2018) seems to be in agreement with

Achebe's opinion when she referred to Soyinka's lecture in 1967 at Stockholm that "The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and the voice of the vision in his own time" (177). In the play-*Hard Ground* the readers are able to deduce that these militants are not alone in their fight; they are also being sponsored by some wealthy and prominent men in the society like the character of Alabo. Come to think of it, these boys are unemployed, there is no means of livelihood, they are young like Nimi who is 18 years and a school dropout, and all they live by are the teachings by the war Lords they look up to like the character of Don. In the play, Alabo assures Nimi thus: "Son, I believe in our cause, and I want to put money in it. Will we succeed? (39). In essence, Yerima knows the direct relationship between literature and social institutions, especially a society in transition just like Nigeria. Today in Nigeria, we have cases of unknown gun-men who have hijacked the IPOB movement in the Eastern part of Nigeria, especially in Imo State and their incessant killings, this issue has brought unrest, fear of the unknown, displacement, and hopelessness even as the governor of the state bears "Hope". What an irony of situation! Also apparent is the case of

banditry in the Northern part of Nigeria. The insurgency in the North makes it very unsafe for habitation. All these defiant groups are sponsored by wealthy and prominent people in the country like the character of Alabo. For Soyinka (1967), "There is in human nature (as manifested in patterns of social behavior) a certain cyclical pattern deriving (deriving) probably from a common ancestry of evil, an evil tendency that is trying to force its way out of man as a result of the interplay of certain forces on man's sensibility. The artist's strident voice, he believes can help curb the excesses that originate from such evil tendencies" (178)

The State of the Nation as Depicted in Akanji Nasiru's *The Rally*

The Rally tackles the issue of the zealous youths against the aged and greedy politicians who have been in power for too long. They become restless as soon as they learn that the youths are making crucial plans to take over power from them. *The Rally* is a social realist play that describes or relates to the topical in Nigeria, where the much anticipated change preached by the present ruling party (All Progressive Congress; APC) has become the greatest nightmare of the people. To Nigerians, "change" means a whole lot of negative adjectives such as: pain,

hunger, starvation, neglect, religious crisis, inter-ethnic rivalry, high rate of crime and corruption, lack of infrastructure, lack of basic amenities, injustice, Islamic extremism, fear of the unknown, dictatorship and so many other ills to mention but a few.

Nasiru in his play *The Rally* exposes the process of election in Nigeria. How the aspirants raise the hopes of the masses during campaigns and as soon as they emerge the winner, the dividends become solely for their family members and generations to come. The play opens with the narrator lamenting that:

The word new has lost its meaning after every crisis; we tried to settle down to make a fresh attempt to gather together the broken fragments of our collective existence. The first time we had strong hopes and expectations we braced up for change, and we sang a song of hope for the new beginning we were about to make (11).

The above statement describes the current state of Nigeria where the APC slogan – “change” is now called “chance” by the Nigerian youths. “Chance” in this context is derogatory and derived from commuters who

use public transport and eventually got deceived by thinking the other people in the bus are supposed passengers but they are actually kidnappers or robbers or a situation where by one does not get what he actually bargained for. The actual word is “one-chance” and it is colloquial. That explained, the country was in desperate need of a leader who can instill discipline, checkmate the high rate of corruption and decadence among some political office holders. Nigerians’ hope for a better living condition if another political party should take over from the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) was shattered. The same old politicians, this time around, with different names, but the same agenda to loot public funds for selfish reasons and continue to impoverish the masses. Nwafor-Orizu (2011) berates the politicians thus: “Their scheme is to eat alone, and in the process serve the interest of their erstwhile masters. Things are well skewed in such a way that every economic activity affects only the rich positively. As for the peasants, they seem to be condemned to perpetual servitude” (79). Life became rather more challenging even with the constant chant of ‘change’ on the lips gullible Nigerians. Corruption now has a triple effect on the economy of the country, the citizens are constantly on survival mode, crime is now

the order of the day, injustice, marginalization, religious crisis, tribal hatred, poverty, hunger and any type of ill one can possibly think of have become the fate of the country since the All Progressive Congress (APC) took over power from the PDP.

Nasiru's play – *The Rally* shows the nation's struggles against bad leadership since independence. This is the reason the nation is still referred to as a third world country even as crude oil is our biggest revenue and other rich mineral and human resources. According to the narrator, this is because:

... From the very beginning, a host of butchers sharpened their knives ready to carve for themselves the choicest portions of the meat. A multitude of hangers-on carried baskets and bags to take away enough meat to last them an age... (12)

Here, the narrator expresses his worry and fear about the coming elections; he explains how greedy those who claim to represent the masses are. They look forward to a new era and there are the political godfathers who, all they are after is oil money and whatever that can enrich their pockets. During elections these politicians spend a lot of money, they “settle” these godfathers with huge amount of

money most of the time in foreign currencies, they throw money around to different organizations and groups who they feel would support their mission. During this period, people sell their consciences because of poverty and hunger and by the time elections are over, the country's treasury is almost empty because the greedy politicians and their cohorts would have made use of the money for their selfish reasons. No doubt Nasiru's *The Rally* reflects the topical political issues that are evident in the country. Isidore Diala (2016) explains Achebe's point on how “irrelevant it is for an African literature to be divorced from crucial political issues” of one's country. Diala in “*The Heir of History*” made reference to Achebe's pronouncement in a talk titled “The African Writer and the Biafran Cause”, which was delivered in 1968 at Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda. It goes thus:

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant. Like that absurd man in the Proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing

from the flames
(78).

Judging from the talk by Achebe, it is glaring that with *The Rally*, Nasiru cannot be classified or seen as the absurd man who chases rat, he is rather seen as the “the voice of vision and the conscience of the society” just as Soyinka (1967) remarked in African-Scandinavian writers conference in Stockholm, Sweden, which was also cited in Diala (2016)

Also topical is the fact that many young Nigerians are now very aware of the sequence of events leading to election period. The advent of the social media has propelled many social realist writers to speak up and sensitize the youths of the country to take over the affairs of the country be it grass root or national affairs. The popular saying that youths are the leaders of tomorrow does not apply to African countries, especially Nigerian. We experience the same people, the same names repeatedly when it has to do with politics in this country. Almost all the politicians we heard their names as kids are the same set of people who are still at the helm of affairs of the country. The immediate past president of Nigeria- General Mohammed Buhari was a military president in the 80s, over thirty (30)years later, he became the president again in a democratic

dispensation. Also, Senator Ike Ekweremadu has represented the Enugu East senatorial zone for over sixteen (16) years before his jail time and many others in that category who believe leadership is their birthright. These politicians can be likened to chief Oladele in *The Rally* “who has been the sole representative of Irepodum people in virtually every matter and situation” (25) and as soon as the Irepodum people got their autonomy, he shows up again to be the chairman of the people without considering if he would be accepted or not so long as he has his praise singers, selfish individuals like him and even the compromised traditional ruler-Baale. These politicians are aware that with the amount of money they throw around, they would always have loyalists. In *The Rally*, Chief Oladele is a representation of such politicians as he was seen lavishing money when he came out to make his intention known to the people (14).

Another real life experience to buttress Nasiru's point on politicians who see the strategic public offices as their birthright has to do with Imo state governorship primaries where, the then Governor-Rochas Okorocha imposed his son-in-law on the people after having spent eight years as the Governor of the said State. There were fraudulent results from different bodies. The then Governor -

Okorochoa swore with his life that his son-in-law must succeed him. This is what happens when a leader is power drunk and knows that he has the backings of some political god-fathers such as the Baale, in *The Rally* who meddles in the politics of the community there by abandoning the people he is supposed to represent.

In *The Rally*, the Baale that is the traditional ruler of the Irepodum people summons Jide who is the president of the Youth Union to talk to him concerning his move on picking or endorsing Dr. Joe with the consent of other members of the Youth organization. (43-46). The Baale who has been compromised by the likes of Chief Oladele and Otun, is seen praising and thanking the youth for their patriotism towards the community. In so doing, he systematically dissuades them from going on with the youth rally, claiming it is for the interest of the entire community of Irepodum(50). This Baale's move is what Nwafor-Orizu (2011) calls "Divide and Rule" (80). He adds that the politicians through their loyalists: "Stoke embers of disharmony and disunity among the people in order to forestall any united action against them- the system of Divide and Rule" (80). Realistically, the action of the Baale is considered topical because most of the traditional rulers have politicized their

offices. They have been compromised; politicians use them at the grass root level to achieve their selfish objectives. Some traditional rulers have totally abandoned their primary function which is for the welfare of the land to meddle in public because they have been given part of the national cake. Surprisingly and also topical is Jide's response to the Baale:

... It was going to
be a peace meeting
from what
Kabiyesi's
messenger told us.
But it now seems to
me that it is in
reality a political
meeting... I find
this too complex
for me to
understand. There
is going to be an
election. We have a
chairman already
(51-52)

Through Jide's response, Nasiru is able to expose the complexities of Nigerian elections be it local or national. The people's votes do not count, the people's interests are not considered, all the political god-fathers are concerned about is how to continue to enrich their pockets through these recycled old politicians. Also topical is who and what the character of Jide represent in reality. This particular scene could be considered as the

beginning of the rising action which builds up the climax of the play and also the revolutionary tendencies as proposed by social realists where the oppressed becomes immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler: his body will become harmonized and the forums of life will become dynamically dramatic. In the play, Jide represents the voice of the oppressed, the class of people who are no longer in agreement with the way the affairs of the community are managed and the time has come for him to become stronger, wiser and more determined to see that his people (Irepodum people) get justice. This resonates with the recently organized protest by the Nigerian youths which lasted from the 1st of August to the 10th of August, 2024. The theme of the protest was to end hunger and bad governance in Nigeria. In the play, Jide turned down his WHO job, teams up with the youths of Irepodum and becomes more determined than ever to change the status quo by making sure that chief Oladele does not become the chairman not even after the Kabiyesi spoke to him. He responds to Kabiyesi by telling him not to meddle in politics (55).

The character of Jide as depicted by Nasiru represents those people who lay down their lives for the common cause so as to liberate their people from the shackles of poverty,

oppression, injustice, poor education, hunger and starvation. He (jide) is to the people of Irepodum who or what Odimegwu Ojukwu or in recent time, Nnamdi Kanu is to 'Ndi Igbo'- the people of the Eastern part of Nigeria, who have felt marginalized since independence and are clamouring for sovereign state of Biafra. These people give hope to the hopeless in Jide's words:" there is always hope. For people who have a mission, hope is never lost (59).

On the other hand, the road to change is full of thorns and sharp stones (71) hearts would be broken, live would be lost, oppositions would rise but since the battle is against the agents of backwardness, the strong -minded would do anything possible to see that a positive change is achieved no matter how long it takes, this is the only way the masses stay hopeful in the face of the struggle. The character of Kunle in *The Rally* represents the traitors, betrayals, moles and insiders that politicians use against their oppositions. Since these politicians are not good in anything else in life except for fraudulent life style, they go to any length to protect their interests. Kunle who is supposed to be the secretary of the youth organization backs out after he has been compromised by Chief Oladele, Baale and Otun. He now begins to see Jide as an enemy and finally backs out of

the fight for the common cause. Otun on his part decides to take Jide's life by sending hired assassins to him and thereafter, makes it look like an accident (73). This is a ploy to see that Jide does not appear on the day of the rally to present Dr. Joe as the candidate of the people. This scene is also topical and relevant to literature in the sense that Nasiru is able to bring to the reader's consciousness the trauma and uncertainties that surround the lives of those activists whose earnest desire is to bring about change. Their lives are not guaranteed, it can be snuffed out of them anytime by those politicians who see them as threats. This is typical of the case of Nnamdi Kanu who left the UK and enthusiastically returned to Nigeria to fight for the actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra. Same goes for Jide in the *The Rally* who schooled abroad and was offered a life time changing opportunity to be with the WHO but gives it up for the sake of his dream to have a new Irepodum (68). Nnamdi Kanu was detained by the former president-General Buhari and his cohort because they see him as a threat to their government. He was later granted bail and technically gave him a house arrest by barricading his house with the military in the name of Python Dance. Nnamdi Kanu was later re-arrested and detained to date. This is what Ibrahim Huma

(1990) meant as he addresses the issue of exploitation of the masses by the leaders who are supposed to protect them and how contemporary writers have depicted the time. He holds that:

Social and political realities of the post independence era in which the colonizer has been replaced by the political elite. African literature of the past two decades have transformed the theme of disillusionment. Where the colonizer was once the sole object of criticism, now African technocrats, cadres and government officials are depicted exploiting the masses they had promised to uplift (85).

In spite of the chaos and tension in the air following the news of Jide's accident and possible death, the youths of Irepodum remained dogged in their common mission to achieve the expected change on the day of the rally while praying that Jide survives the accident because his death can devastate the people who have come to believe so much in him (83). However, there was light at the end of the tunnel for the people of Irepodum as Jide was able to make it before the end of the rally. Though he was seen limping, he was brave enough to present Dr. Joe as the

people's candidate. On a positive note, Jide's accident in *The Rally* represents the activists and writers who get killed or jailed while fighting for liberation. Also, through Jide's return, the successful pronouncement of Dr. Joe as the representative of the party, and the song of hope by the Irepodum people, the reader comes to know that: there is actually unity in diversity.

In conclusion, if there would be a significant change and total liberation, the masses have a critical assignment to be completed and they must be united for this assignment to be carried out effectively. It's been noted that the neo-colonial African leaders continued with the same tactics used by the colonial masters- where they planted the seed of hatred in the minds of the people because of the diversity in culture and religion. The ethnic and tribal wars were the tactics of the white man to make Nigerians turn a blind eye to their form oppression while they loot the rich oil nation for their selfish gains. Now, how can the desired change the masses crave for happen? Just as Ngugi noted that fear of death is the major factor that pulls people down and stops them from achieving their own liberation. Therefore, when this fear factor is conquered, he recommends that the same tactics that were employed against the colonial masters should be used. This will

most definitely solve the problem because according to Micere Githae Mugo (1997), that "under neo-colonialism, members of the ruling elite (whether military or civilian) essentially represent the interest of imperialism at the expense of the economically deprived masses" (146). However, Ngugi's recommendation resounds with Jean-Paul Sartre (1967) that: "the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about (14). In essence, the topicality of the themes embedded in both plays remains irrefutable and their similarities are closely knit. The titles and characterization are also very significant.

Therefore, for change to be attainable, the able bodied youths must struggle to produce a servant leader with solid morals, disciplined background, and the inspirational ability to galvanize the people to higher, lofty and common purpose. Nigerian youths can only fight to rebuild the nation as a united body by standing up to the old recycled politicians. Change is possible but a lot of restructuring has to be done; at the local government, state and national levels.

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