

VALUES AND REPRESENTATIONS IN EMEKA  
NWABUEZE'S *GUARDIAN OF THE COSMOS*:  
A STUDY IN EVOCATIVE SOCIAL ETHOS

"Under the sun  
The race is not to the swift  
Nor the battle to the strong...  
*Ecclesiastes 9*"

Solomon, in *Ecclesiastes* cited above, seems to capture almost succinctly the fate of man and the ironies in life, and in the process neatly summarises the core of the strategy in most contemporary African drama. In reality as in the Bible, artists have variously explored the precarious position of man in his society, and the workings of that society in general. For in his struggles to live life to the fullest, man always finds himself faced with forces of retrogression, and many indications show man's futility in overcoming these forces.

In Nwabueze's play *Guardian of the Cosmos* we see such apt presentation of the problems facing an individual's effort at societal reconstruction. This study will, therefore, examine the deep seated causes of the seemingly persistent aberrant situation in the African political and social life, as painted by the playwright. *Guardian of the Cosmos* is a bold and beautiful exploration of salient issues of power tussle and of politics; a balanced and adroit portrayal of people's perception of this important factor of every civilized community. In the play the obvious theme becomes the crisis in politics; the cause of the abysmal failures in society, and according to Peter Harris (1976:13), "the public issues which give rise to conflict." Nwabueze's accomplishment lies in the astute exposure of different levels of thought and imagination, different levels of understanding of societal issues, and the expostulation of the ordinary man's perception of public morality and of politics. Nwabueze makes another kind of achievement: an energetic and dramaturgical presentation of ideological polarization and

Ezeudo fails to grasp the traditional wisdom in Akukalia's proverb, "the man whose strength intoxicates him will one day surrender that strength to the burial mat" (p.22).

Above all, Ezeudo is politically immature. His political modesty borders on pride and naivety. He does not understand the true nature of politics and is deluded by his vision to reform society. This over-zealousness renders Ezeudo insensitive to the admonitions of his wife, Afulenu, and his friend, Akunne. A remarkable woman, Afulenu exhibits a surprising intellectual and political awareness. She is more politically advanced and reasonable than her husband, and is the only female character who could fathom the dynamics of politics in her society. Like a prophetess, Afulenu foretells her husband's doom in very tragic terms:

the people of this land have more darkness than light.  
The man that attempts to clear the darkness receives a  
spot of darkness in his skull (p.10).

Like Akunne she understands that the issue of political leadership is a topical, problematic and complicated one replete with intricacies and intrigues. She is the only character who sees through Ezeudo's illusion and who cleverly presents a startling synthesis of the human race and of political establishment. Like Akunne also, Afulenu realises that every member of society is out for what she/he will gain from Ezeudo (cf pp. 8, 34-35). In her, the writer embodies his fears of the present generation, of problems in leadership, of moral integrity and of the political spirit of the populace.

Against Ezeudo's background of pious hopes and patriotism lies Akukalia, an "astute politician" (p.27). Essentially, the contrast between Akukalia and Ezeudo is a contrast between different ideological and philosophical spheres, between illusion and reality, and between "material poverty and spiritual poverty."

We meet the antagonist for the first time at the gathering of the elders and are immediately struck by his haughty arrogance and inflated pomposity. A political scoundrel, Akukalia is an archetype of political and moral sterility. He

speaks with lordly contempt, affecting arrogance and nauseating superiority complex. Typical of the politician he is, Akukalia lays implicit faith in his credentials and wealth:

I am a full-fledged politician in this country. I've been a local government Chairman, a Minister without portfolio, a Commissioner, a Presidential Adviser; and finally a Senator. My political expedition has cut across the two republics of this nation. Show me any man in this assembly with such credentials (p.20).

And, later, when the oracle proclaims that Ezeudo could contest for the chieftaincy, Akukalia again boasts of his riches:

I have the prettiest house in this land, the prettiest cars and the prettiest wives. I'm an international figure. I have both national and international connections. I won't like a pauper to be associated with the chieftaincy of this land. Ezeudo may be intelligent and fearless, and may possess the spirit of the so called patriotism, but he's a pauper (p.26).

Akukalia sees his credentials and ill-acquired wealth as sure means to political ascendancy. And not minding that he was an ex-convict and uncertificated teacher (p.20), he challenges the decision of the elders. More politically mature than Ezeudo, Akukalia is conversant with the intrigues and machinations of modern political setting and fully exploits this knowledge to his advantage. That is why he was able to lure Ezeudo's friend, Anene, to his side and thus get to know of Ezeudo's tainted ancestry. That is why, also, he was able to read meaning in the words of the oracle. The prophecy of Agbala is a two-edge sword like Janus, the Roman god with two faces. But unlike Ezeudo, Akukalia realises this fact stating confidently that there is more to the simplest and logical explanations of the situation than meets the eye: "the ancestors have said he could contest but they haven't named him chief" (p.27), Akukalia asserts defiantly.

In the face of all his boasting, we see Akukalia as a corrupt, selfish, greedy man who used his privileged position to enrich himself. In Akukalia, therefore, the playwright lodges his criticism of fraud and corruption in public offices and of the distorted conception of politics among the people. Akukalia's attitude also reveals the general political psyche of the land.

Wealth, no matter how it was obtained, is regarded as the only necessary criterion for a political aspirant. Akukalia himself, restates this view when he was reacting to the proclamation of the Priest of Agbala: "The wheels of history", he says, "are very tough, they're hardly ever turned by the poor" (p.27).

But the writer's main butt of attack lies not as much in such political leaders as in the people themselves who - as shown in the last scene change their stand and opinion without compunction. The masses have no strong will. Greed, and love for money mask their perception of reason and their actions are conditioned by monetary values and selfish considerations. This behaviour can be compared to that of the Plebians in *Julius Ceasar* whose interest and support oscillate between contending values as presented by Brutus and Mark Anthony. In *Guardian of the Cosmos* as in *Julius Ceasar* personal interests dictate the people's line of action. Everyone is secretly nursing the hope of getting something from the leader.

Anene is a clear-cut personification of this hypocrisy, and of the people's negative and retrogressive mentality. His betrayal of Ezeudo is motivated by greed. He shows that neither status, age, educational nor social attainment poses a deterrence to people's hypocritical and corrupt nature. It is a nation where sincerity, honesty, and hardwork are cast aside in favour of wealth and credentials.

What Nwabueze is saying, therefore, is that the persistent failures in leadership should not only be attributed to the despotic oppressors in the guise of leaders. Rather, every person in society is to blame for giving unflinching support to dubious and fraudulent people. Idigo bitterly laments over this destructive egocentricism, and calls this world "ghastly earth" (p.41):

That's the trouble with our land. In the pursuit for material wealth, in the battle for recognition, in the quest for power, our people don't think about the dead. Rather, they send people to the land of the dead... Our people don't even consider the unborn, not even their fellow tenants in this ghastly earth. They think only of themselves. That's the trouble with this land!

It is in this aspect that Nwabueze's play offers a refreshingly different and appealing dimension of the political scenario. While in works treating issues of leadership, such as Tunde Fatunde's *No Food, No Country* and *No More Oil Boom*, the workers organise themselves and fight oppression and repression, the masses in *Guardian of the Cosmos* are not eager to fight against the decadent status quo or against exploitation. They are as dishonest and as unscrupulous as the politicians, and their conduct is regulated more by their stomach than by their head. According to Nwabueze, (1991:24)

"This is a doomed society where people are revered even when they are thieves, a profligate society where materialism blinds even the virtuous..."

Nwabueze, therefore, sees the people as the cause of moral and political decadence in society and lashes out on them for their sycophancy. Almost all the characters are interested in what she/he will gain from a particular association. Afulenu points this out in her meditation:

My husband... thinks he is going to change the system. But how can he accomplish that when the entire land is filled with wolves? He thinks those he calls his supporters are honest but he doesn't know they're supporting him because of what they stand to gain from him. Even his acolyte has his own plans. They're all stalling for time. When the time comes and he doesn't dance to the tune of their music, they will strike him down (p.34).

Akunne had previously warned Ezeudo to be careful about his blind (though laudable) ravings:

Don't begin to say that this early or they will desert you before you're even pronounced chief. The whole society is filled with thieves. Whether they're in khaki, agbada, or the gown and hood, it's the same thing when it comes to moral ethics (p.29).

It is because of this moral degeneration that Akukalia is painted a hero at the death of Ezeudo, in spite of his proven corruption. His name Akukalia which literally means "wealth is greater" underlines the social value placed on wealth.

It is against this value that Ezeudo fights and it is this too that the writer portrays and condemns. Ezeudo however is

destroyed in the process and Akukalia ascends the throne. This unexpected turn in events is significant. Politics is not a game for the just and the honest. The rule of the game is money. Just as Afulenu predicted, the society is too corrupt that its darkness overwhelms any light emerging to illuminate it. What matters to the governed is not as much as the hardwork of a dedicated leader as the material gains they will acquire. "Money is our madness", so says Herbert Lawrence, "our vast collective madness" (1977). Ezeudo, like the tragic character he is, realises this fact very late and laments over his ignorance:

Afulenu....

I thought I had the light

But my light is not bright enough

To eclipse the darkness...(p.39)

At the end, therefore, the *Guardian of the Cosmos* becomes that money wielding, deceptively charming, intrinsically dishonest displayer of wealth.

Embedded in the play therefore is the light and darkness motif. On the one side is Ezeudo and his overriding desire to correct societal ills; on the other hand is Akukalia and his vaunting selfish interest. A tussle for supremacy consequently ensues between the two. But, unlike most archetypical struggles between right and wrong, good and evil, light and darkness, in which positive values triumph over negative ones, truth is overcome by evil in *Guardian of the Cosmos*. Ezeudo's demise points back to our prologue, and to the futility of cleansing the political arena. "And it demonstrates one of the inexplicable ironies of life, which is that truth can sometimes be destroyed by evil and that a revolution is not accomplished by simplicity" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1992:191). Wisely did Solomon make his prophetic pronouncements on a world in a shambles.

A study in political decadence and sterility, *Guardian of the Cosmos* has a universal validity. This universal appeal is enhanced by the contrasting characters \_ Ezeudo and Akukalia - and by the writer's endeavour to extend his critique to cover the entire populace. In this way the people are forced to look at their own image and judge themselves. Nwabueze does not

commit himself to any specific ideology. Ours is a world dominated by greed and lust for power and wealth; a world turned inside out and upside down. Embedded in the work is the writer's disappointment at the erosion of moral values and important ethics and sentiments.

*Guardian of the Cosmos* remains a powerful realistic work of art. The play will continue to appeal to readers because of its disturbing and disheartening portrayal of politics, and because the tragedy of Ezeudo is the tragedy of all well-meaning members of society whose efforts are drowned in the cesspool of materialism and egocentricism.

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