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SOCIAL SATIRE, THE PLAYWRIGHT AND ARTISTIC VISION IN BASSEY UBONG'S *MANCHILD BLUES*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the deployment of social satire as aesthetic strategy in Bassey Ubong's Manchild Blues. The paper notes that contemporary society is shaped by manifold crisis, tension and confusion and writers, in their patriotic bids to expose and interrogate these wrongs often resort to portraying them in their works, incorporate satiric and humorous techniques to expose social inanities and pass their messages across to the universe of their experience with ease and excitement. It is against this backdrop that this work sets out to examine how the author deploys satiric techniques to bring to the literary front burnerthe societal ills, aimed at effecting a possible change. This work uses qualitative methodology because all data analyzed are based on close reading of the primary text. The paper reveals that, social realities pose serious influence on the writer's imagination, strip the envisioned contemporary world and in the process contribute to the repair the socio-political, economic and cultural state of people and society. The work concludes that satirical technique helps the writer to unveil societal ills but makes them to appear mild and less injurious without being pedantic or sounding unserious.

Keywords: Social satire, humorous technic, moral foible, artistic vision, Bassey Ubong.

Introduction

Literature from inception has remained a predominant means of eliciting exhilarations and the sublime appreciation of man towards nature and the world around him, just as it has been a means of expressions of inner thought and feelings, re-familiarizing the complexities, apprehensions and contradictions that plague humanity. This agrees with Emeka Nwabueze's opinion that "literature constitutes the best and brightest expressions of all humanity. It helps us to solve real problems, the problem of existence, the problem of being human" (5). Okon Udofot Jacob argues that: "This informs why literature has always been the rallying point and a convenient platform through which societal issues are projected" (88). Thus, writers who are also members of the society, and have been part of every experience in their society, have no option than to recreate these experiences in their literary works, and do it in a way that

poignantly depicts every socio-political issue perceived to be inimical to the society. This task of the artist as a social watchman agrees with Rebecca Usoro and Monica Udoette's standpoint that "all creative imaginations … articulate dimensions of social experience" (61). The bulk of literary works emanating from Africa since the inception of European contact through the phases of development, in every genre including autobiographical writings (Udoinwang and Tsaaior 2023) reflect the socio-political realities of postcolonial histories and experiences. This situation also agrees with the position of Ngugiwa Thiong'O' when he argues that "The writer as a human being is himself a product of history, of time and place. As a member of the society, he belongs to certain class and he is inevitably a participant in the struggle of time" (72). In the contemporary universe, the phenomenon of "social hysteria" and anxiety that characterize the postmodern (dis)order echoes resoundingly in literary works (Udoinwang and Akpan 2022). This implies that as a member of the society, the writer has the duty and responsibility to comment on the affairs of the society. He must play a part in whatever happens in it. Also, on the role of the writer in society, Jacob also opines that "…the artist owes it a duty to stand at the cleavages of mediation and interventions" (46).It is this meditative role that the writer performs that informs (Usoro and Udoette, 2020) position that literature "gives insight into the frail socio-political milieu"(139) that disillusioned and dispassionate people grapple with. To use the artistic medium to participate in social development, writers have devised diverse ways and means of unleashing their creative energy in the pursuits of explicating the ways to go of society.

One major literary form through which writers undertake the above onerous literary task is satire. Satire is an ancient literary tool that has taken root in every writing culture. According to Dal Bahadur Gaha: "Satire as a literary technique of writing, is derived from Latin adjective "satura", and it suggests a hotchpotch or a mixture in literature....it means a bowl of displaying colorful fruits or food dishes (lanxsatura)" (7). According to Gaha:

> In satire, human abuses, follies, shortcomings are held up to censure by means of derision, parody, burlesque, and ridicule, directing toward the positive change. Satire evokes an attitude of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation toward human failings and wretchedness in the hope of somehow rectifying it. Satire, fundamentally lashes out or laughs at any sort of folly and hypocrisy. Satire thus launches attack upon an individual's evil activities, as an expression of discontent (7).

The aim of this sub literary genre is not only to draw up mockery or laughter but to also correct the flaws as it is rightly observed. Thus, it can be seen as a mild or amicable way of pointing out mistake(s) such that even the victim does not pick offense, yet goes home with the message embedded in the satirized expression. It is on this note that Charles Knight avers that "Satire takes the form of specific attack, even when real subject of satire is not object of attack. The element of play that usually marks that attack may make matters worse, in so far as, from the victim's point of view, being mocked may seem more distressing than merely being disagreed with, however strongly or publicly, or it may, to the audience, make the attack more tolerable by making it entertaining (3).

Nigerian writers have always lived to this responsibility by subtly exposing the inanities and foibles of the leaders in their literary works, against the background of what David Udoinwang and Chinenye Amonyeze describe as ".A strain of negativity and appalling paradoxes …" (159) bedeviling African postcolonial society. According to Kufre Akpan,

"African writers, using various approaches and in all genres, have continued to explore, in their critical enterprises, these socio-political and religious issues in contemporary African society" (1). Kufre Akpan and Monica Udoette further adds that "since Nigeria's attainment of nationhood, the Nigerian literary and critical spaces have been flooded with discourses revolving around the gnawing leadership inanities, believed to be responsible for the myriads of socio-political and economic challenges that have suffocated the Nigerian humanity" (191) .This implies that as a member of the society, the writer has the duty and responsibility to comment on the affairs of the society. He must play a part in whatever happens in it. Their major preoccupation has been a vehement expression of disillusionment about the new realities of leadership in the country, and have been living up to their responsibility as the watch dog of the society. Likewise, Monica Udoette and Joy Nwiyi reveal that writers are tasked with the responsibility of acting "as agents of social change and carriers of intellectual and organizational alternatives to the status quo" (197). Chinua Achebe is of the view that "contending with these issues is a self-imposed responsibility hoisted on the writer by the realities of his existence" (15). In line with this view, Chidi Amuta argues that "social experience is the primary source of literature" (85). Thus, writers can be likened to a man with a two-edged sword which can be very lethal particularly to those at the receiving end (Osofisan, 15). Chinweizu warns that "any writer who must keep his work unsullied by the political concerns of his society deludes himself and consequently misses the mark" (231). His position strongly corroborates that of Wole Soyinka, who emphasizes that "there is need for the artist to be directly and actively involved by opting for an integral relationship even at the level of planning" (24). This means that the writer is not supposed to act as an outsider concerning those unpalatable events occurring in his society. As a member of the society, he has to put his art in the service of that society. To this end, *Wa Thiong'o* argues that:

> Literature is of course, primarily concerned with what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and values governing human relationship. The writer cannot be exempted from the task of exposing the distorted values governing such a jungle precisely because this distorts healthy human relationship (*Homecoming*, xvi-xvii).

The above assertion implies that no writer should ever write in isolation. His inspiration should always be sharpened by the drive to expose and bring to the fore all the contradictions and apprehensions that have engulfed his society.

It is against this backdrop that George Orwell reveals why he engages in writing: "When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, I am going to produce a work of art. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some facts to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing"(5).Orwell's confession is akin to the reason behind the writings of Nigerian writers who have had to bring their artistry to bear on what Udoinwang and Udoette describe as *"…the confused momentum and the socio-cultural chaos which result from competing worldviews" (217*) of present postcolonial socio-cultural reality. Writers essentially in the given context, aim at using arts "to create a society where there will be justice, equality and fair play, a society where the leaders and the followers live in harmony and where peace and progress prevail" (Agbasiere, 80). It is for this reason that David Udoinwang and Kufre Akpan aver that "African writers consistently use their creative works as channels to expose the misdemeanors that characterize societies and put the citizenry on unnecessary flights and turn them to unwanted refugees elsewhere" (342).

Therefore, social satire is a style of fictional representation (in literature) that makes use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize the behavior of people, particularly in a social or political context. Agreeably, satire is a unique writing technique used in approaching the social issues bordering on the people; this makes *Man child Blues* by Bassey Ubong to appear suitable, as the play treats societal ills with satirical techniques.

Social Satire in *Manchild Blues*

Manchild Blues is a satiric play that pokes on the leadership, as well as the societal foibles. Through the use of humor, irony and exaggeration, the play serves as a mirror, reflecting the absurdities and contradictions that permeate everyday life of people in the society of the play's setting. This confirms the fact that in the realm of literature, social satire stands as a powerful tool, capable of exposing follies and vices of the society with a sharp wit and a subtle twist. Through the actions of the characters, the play sheds light on these flaws, and thus, provokes introspection, critique, and ultimately, the possibility of positive change.

One of the major issues engaged by the writer isdeceit. An instance of deceit is revealed sarcastically by the author when the character Lovette, a girl in her twenties is in a somewhat fake relationship with Paadilo, an old man in his sixties. It is apparent that Paadilo is single, a dancer and music guru known for harboring different women.Because he is rich, Lovette only agree to be in the relationship because of the material things that she gains from Paadilo. The relationship is somewhat contractual as revealed in the text through dialogues, which is non-normative and unacceptable in the society. This is summarily captured in the conversation between Lovette and Paadilo:

Paadilo: What stage are we now
Lovette: the best of friends?
Paadilo: with no future.
Lovette: The future is not cloudy. You agreed that after I have found a guy, you will go your way; I will go mine
Paadilo: so I wait for you to find the right guy.
Lovette: Yes
Paadilo: How long will it take?
Paadilo: No one can tell (pause)….. (6).

The author, as a satirist, employs irony and sarcasm to unmask the deceit that is present in various domains, including politics, religion and social lives of the people. Through the satirical lens of the author, the text exposes the self-serving motives, double standards, and inconsistencies that often plague the ever evolving modern society. The author, in revealing these odd and unacceptable practices in the society, seems to be encouraging the society to re-evaluate their actions in order to foster an honest and principled society. In the words of Clifford Sibani and Asukwo Oko: "the values and customs of the community influence their attitude towards everything they do" (108).

Lovette does not want to marry him because he is old, but she is not also ready to quit the union because of Paadilo's money. It is also a misnomer that Lovette's mother endorses this idea and encourages her daughter to indulge in such anti-social act. David Udoinwang and Kufre Akpan aver that: "The present era of popular culture, social media, digital modernity, strange dialects with incoherent idioms, and broken family values, manifests a medley of

socio-cultural activities that tend to dismantle earlier notions of social relations and traditional, ethical, cultural and socio-economic value systems" (186).Paadilo's conversation here is satiric and exposes the height of human follies.

> Paadilo: Okay. From three cars to six cars; from three houses to six houses; from three businesses to six businesses; from three books six books. Wao. Achievement doubler! (8).

After all Paadilo has done for Lovett's mother and family and hoping that she could help broker a genuine relationship with her daughter, Paadilo feels pained on realizing that she is the one orchestrating the insincerity characterizing his union with Lovett. This is seen as injustice at its level. According to Ohaeri Ndubuwa and Asukwo Oko:"Social justice must be practically sustained to promote unity, peace, and progressive relationship" (169). Lovett's situation in the text ridicules poor parenting and takes a swipe at parents who push their children into indulging in anti-social and societal activities. Ndubuwa and Oko further aver that: "…the desires and wanton greed affect peaceful coexistence in the world" (50).The above postulations sum up Monica Udoette position that indeed, "conventions and morality is still largely determined by" definitive "societal conventions" (211).

Another issue that has attracted the author's literary lenses is the societal placement of prominence on male children, at the expense of the female. The text is not only critical of, but also challenges such seeming conventional norms, shedding light on irrationality and absurdity that characterize the norms.The author highlights this in the play and advocates balanced preference for both sexes. This conversation captures the above scenario.

Paadilo: Daughter of woman, see how you have used style to insult me (Shakes his head sadly)
Lovette: All the time? And, why did you call me daughter of woman? I am my father's daughter.
Paadilo: I thought woman gave birth to you
Lovette: In our patriarchy society, children belongs to father's (21).

Here the author stresses that child worth should be at the same level, irrespective of gender. Interestingly, Bassey Ubong in the conversation above also projects the female character as very assertive. This echoes Monica Udoette's stance that "the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings" is "crucial to developing a sense of self" (76). In addition, the author posits that if the male and female are treated equally, it will mitigate female oppression in the society. This informs Kufre Akpan's argument that "being a woman or man is a matter of cultural compulsion and not necessarily from sex" (150). This also affirms the position of this paper that satire acts like social activism, by bringing the societal flaws to the fore.

Also, SPARK musical group in the text, is used by the author as an agent of satire, singing the ills of society at every occasion. Their songs are an embodiment of moral kind of advice to the society, and projects absurd scenarios as in the case of Paadilo. The songs mediate, satirize, challenge, and question the values, behaviors and assumptions prevalent in society. Monica Udoette(2023) describes this creative adaptation of songs as "reinvention as a narrative construct and" justifies "the intensity of its social meaning" (7). The text looks beyond the surface and explores the deeper layers of societal issues. Asukwo Oko and Collins Ogbodo

aver that "Cultural values of the people are their reputation" (21).This reality is expressed in the day to day life of people in society. In some of the songs, the author challenges the judicious use of time and encourages the reader to consider the consequences of given actions and the impact of choices made, as time waits for no man. In the play, Paadilo is vulnerable to women who are after his money. This scene is satiric, as the author seems to insinuate that improper usage of time, as in the case of Paadilo who, at sixty, is still flirting with girls of all kind, may be ruinous.

It becomes late when Paadilo realizes that he has wasted his nurturing an unfruitful relationship. His new consciousness arises when Lovette gives him a cold shoulder towards his marriage proposal, considering his old age. This is evidence in the lines of the song below:

Lead SPARK: The journey of life
Forward, backwards, sideways
Left, right, down,up
Just to reach the top, and stay.
The secret, then, now, is always
Is to move on with time

SPARK: Move on, move on, with time, with time

Lead SPARK: When grandpa dances ajasco
Jumps, pumps, barks, dreams
We wonder, think, scratch
Our heads, and wonder, if he is a candidate for Aro
It's good; it's fair
To do all things in time
On time; on time (2ce) (2).

The author uses the song to poke on Paadilo and his flaws. The song seems to posit that catching up with time demands one's judicious use of time, as time waits for no man.

Hypocrisy is another element of satire in the text. Through Paadilo and Lovette, the author aims at challenging hypocrisy which has become the prevailing norms in society, with its attendant consequences. A scenario in the play reveals the hypocritical nature of Nigerian leaders. AsukwoOko had earlier posited that: "It is an agreeable fact that, Nigerian nation is entangled in a web of atrocities and maladies such as: corruption, gross under-development, armed robbery, banditry, hooliganism, political violence, intolerance, political discord and other crimes of different magnitudes including injustice which is the order of the day" (188). The above are seen as consequences of leadership deficit in the country and the situation has historically formed the thrust of works by Nigerian writers. Kufre Akpan and Naomi Okon aver that: "From the era of the great African literary icon, Chinua Achebe, to the present time, leadership issues have always occupied a prominent position in Nigerian literary and social discourses" (1). This can be seen in the ensuing conversation below:

Paadilo: Look my friend, this is my palace. Always announce your entry before entering.
Bobby: This is also a studio and therefore a business interest can enter unannounced.
Paadilo: So what's your business interest?

Bobby: I have a chart buster to record.
Paadilo: (Laughs). My friend, we have facilities to record stars with great voices, not toads.
Bobby: Toads become chart buster if handed professionally.
Paadilo: Say something else. Singing is not for everybody. Let me tell you - not every member of a choir is a chorister. Some share songs; some sweep the venue (43)

In the above conversation, satire becomes conspicuous, as the author uses Paadilo to satirize the Nigerian nation and her leaders. He does not want to give Bobby a chance to display his talent in the music industry and, instead, makes derogatory comments that destroys Bobby's interest and ambition in music industry.

Paadilo, in some sense, metaphorizes Nigeria, her government and leadership style. It may be indisputable that Nigeria is a nation that rarely gives her citizens the opportunity and peaceful ambience to excel in different areas of life. This leads to rural-urban migration. Ndubuwa and Oko posit that: "the desire to escape from harsh realities of persistence poverty in rural areas and to enjoy the more comfortable life in the urban cities has accelerated this phenomenon of urban shift" (184-185).Kufre Akpan and Monica Udoette further reveal that "In Africa, myriads of ugly indexes account for migration, especially, by the young ones, who leave the shores of the continent daily, in droves. Nigeria, in particular, has been plagued with insurgent wars that have decimated a significant percentage of its citizens" (64).Irrespective of how intelligent you are, you must also have a godfather to be given an opportunity to do anything. Kufre Akpan further views this as "an agonizing index of deformities that characterize the socio-political space of the postcolonial African nation states" (28).

Ethnic bigotry is another aspect of societal ill that the author extends his satirical lenses to. The author brings this situation to the fore to challenge and subvert existing power dynamics in the Nigerian society. According to Benjamin Atanang, John Ekanem and AsukwoOko, "Religious and ethnic sentiments now dominate the country's daily activities. Some individuals are of the view that the nation be divided into at least three nations" (197).Joy Nwiyi and Monica Udoette further agree that these sentiments "… threaten boundaries and commitment to indigenous ways that are particularly significant to communities and individuals" (8). The author therefore satirizes the misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or clash of values, highlighting the often comical nature of these situations, while promoting empathy and understanding. The textcritiques power imbalances and systemic discrimination related to ethnicity and tribalism. Satire highlights the contradictions or absurdities inherent in the commodification or exploitation of ethnic cultures.

The conversation between Paadilo and Adaobi reveals cultural differences, as Adaobi's mother disapproves of the marriage between her daughter and Paadilo, stating that they do not share anything in common. In contrast, Monica Udoette (2014), points to the inclusive nature of the discourse of difference and tolerance in contemporary writing and "validates diversity in terms of "aspringboard "for a plethora of ideas" (38). The conversation below shows a society yet to embrace the wealth of diversity in the country:

Adaobi: I don't know how to tell you this but…
Paadilo: I have seen so much in my life that little or nothing shakes me.
Adaobi: Very well then. My mum says because we are not of the same tribe and we don't attend the same church, we cannot get married.

> **Paadilo:** Does money have tribal marks? Is there any currency that bears the name of a church? (46).

It further indicates serious tribal hatred that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian, and indeed, most of African society. The idea that Adaobi should not tie a marital knot with Paadilo arises from hatred of the other ethnic group.

Conclusion

This work examines the creative ingenuity by which Bassey Ubong in his play *Manchild Blues*, draws on satire as veritable artistic tool in the explication of the lowly moral condition of the society in his artistic vision, and the specific indictment of postcolonial African states, using Nigeria as atypical setting, as society still grappling with primordial sentiments such as religious bigotry, moral depravity, ethnicity and self-serving leadership that inhibit sustainable growth the society and human development. The analysis not only points at the means by which play uses dialogue and characterization to reveal the rot that manifests in the thought and actions of the elites in society, but also unravels the multifaceted socio-cultural and moral crises that bedevil the Nigerian state, and in all, heightens the utility of literary work as important medium of social criticism, national integration and moral regeneration.

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