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DRAMA AND SOCIAL CRITICISM: THE PERSPECTIVE OF EMEKA NWABUEZE'S *LACHRYMOSE*

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Abstract

Drama in African literary tradition has consistently functioned as a medium for social interrogation and ideological critique. Emeka Nwabueze's Lachrymose (2014), contributes to this tradition. The play is a socially committed Nigerian drama that interrogates the erosion of moral values, youth delinquency, and communal responsibility in contemporary Nigerian society. This paper examines the play as a work of social criticism that dramatizes the tensions between individual behaviour and collective ethical failure. This study examines the play as a vehicle of social criticism using sociological and Marxist literary frameworks. It argues that Lachrymose is not merely a tragic representation of individual failure but a broader indictment of structural injustice and communal irresponsibility. Through its portrayal of neglected youths, ineffective leadership, and collapsing moral systems, the play reveals the consequences of societal neglect. The study concludes that Nwabueze uses drama as an instrument of social consciousness and reform.

Keywords: Drama, Social Criticism, Lachrymose, Youth, Society, Marxism, Emeka Nwabueze.

Introduction

African drama has over the years functioned as a medium of social criticism, with playwrights engaging issues such as corruption, moral decline, and institutional failure. From the works of early dramatists such as Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo to contemporary playwrights like Emeka Nwabueze and Sam Ukala, drama has consistently served as a platform for addressing issues of governance, morality, identity, and social justice. In Nigeria especially, drama is not only a form of artistic expression but also a vehicle for ideological engagement and social transformation. In Nigeria especially, drama is not only a form of artistic expression but also a vehicle for ideological engagement and social transformation.

Emeka Nwabueze, one of the prominent voices of contemporary Nigerian theatre, aligns with this tradition by producing socially conscious plays that reflect the realities of postcolonial society. In *Lachrymose* (2024), Emeka Nwabueze presents a society in emotional and structural distress, where the younger generation is caught in the web of systemic neglect and social breakdown. The title itself, "Lachrymose," suggests sorrow, grief, and emotional suffering, which symbolically reflects the collective condition of society depicted in the play.

Sociological literary criticism posits that literature is deeply embedded within the social structures that produce it. According to Swingewood (1972), literature is a social product that

reflects class relations, ideologies, and institutional contradictions. Similarly, Goldmann (1964) argues that literary works express the "world vision" of particular social groups. Within this framework, *Lachrymose* is examined as a scathing dramatic representation of social breakdown and moral disorientation in contemporary African society. This study therefore examines *Lachrymose* as a text of social criticism, exploring how Nwabueze uses dramatic form to expose and interrogate the contradictions within Nigerian society.

Statement of the Problems

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Nigerian drama, limited critical attention has been given to Emeka Nwabueze's Lachrymose from a sociological perspective. Existing studies tend to focus on thematic analysis without sufficiently engaging the play as a reflection of social institutions and structural dysfunctions. This gap necessitates a critical interrogation of how Lachrymose dramatizes the relationship between society, morality, and human behaviour.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine Lachrymose as a sociological text that critiques contemporary African society.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Analyze the representation of social institutions in Lachrymose.
2. Examine the causes and manifestations of moral decadence in the play.
3. Explore the role of family and community in shaping behaviour.

4. Investigate how drama functions as a tool for social critique and reform.

Literature Review

Sociological criticism has been widely applied in African literary studies to explore the relationship between literature and society. Durkheim (1897) emphasizes the concept of anomie, a state of normlessness that results when societal regulations weaken. This concept is useful in understanding the moral instability depicted in many African dramatic texts. Marxist critics, such as Marx (1867) and Eagleton (1976), view literature as a reflection of class struggle and ideological conflict. In African drama, this approach has been used to analyze how playwrights depict oppression, inequality, and social injustice.

In Nigerian drama specifically, scholars such as Ogunba (1985) and Obafemi (2001) argue that drama functions as a corrective tool for societal transformation. They assert that playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, and Femi Osofisan use drama to expose political corruption and moral decay. Although limited scholarly work exists on Emeka Nwabueze's *Lachrymose*, available studies suggest that the play engages with youth delinquency, broken family structures, and communal irresponsibility (Okeke, 2020). However, these studies do not fully explore the sociological dimensions of the text, a gap this study seeks to fill.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Sociological Literary Criticism, which views literature as a product of social forces and a reflection of societal structures. The framework draws principally from the works of Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Lucien Goldmann.

Durkheim's concept of anomie is particularly relevant to Lachrymose. Anomie describes a situation in which societal norms weaken, leading to moral confusion, deviance, and social instability. In the play, the breakdown of family authority and community regulation produces youths who lack direction and ethical grounding.

From a Marxist perspective, society is structured around unequal power relations that influence behaviour and consciousness. Marxist criticism helps to interpret *Lachrymose* as a dramatization of social inequality, institutional failure, and the consequences of neglect by ruling and elite structures. Goldmann's concept of "world vision" further explains how literary texts express the collective consciousness of social groups. *Lachrymose* reflects a world view characterized by anxiety over moral decline and the erosion of communal solidarity in contemporary African society.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and textual analytical method. The primary source of data is Emeka Nwabueze's *Lachrymose*, while secondary sources include journal articles, books on sociological criticism, and critical works on African drama. The analysis is conducted through close reading, focusing on: characterization, dialogue, conflict structure, thematic development, and symbolic representation. The interpretive approach is informed by sociological literary theory, enabling the study to situate the play within broader social and cultural realities.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

Emeka Nwabueze's *Lachrymose* is a socially engaged tragic drama that explores the consequences of moral decay, failed parenting, and weakened social institutions in a contemporary African community. The play is a scathing satire that examines the erosion of moral values and systemic corruption within contemporary Nigerian society. A satire is a critical work on societal ills. It ridicules human beings by exposing their socio-political, religious, legal, and other weaknesses (Eziechine,2024). It is used as a weapon to fight against the irregularities and abnormalities in society so as to bring people back to the world of reality where laws and other are maintained (Sosanya and Mabawonku, 2022).

Synopsis of the play, *Lachrymose*

The play set in a contemporary Nigerian town, centres on a troubled society in Nigeria, where the younger generation is increasingly drawn into deviant behaviour due to the absence of proper guidance from family, school, and community structures. At the heart of the narrative are youths whose actions reflect confusion, frustration, and moral instability. Their behavioural decline is not portrayed as natural but as a product of systemic failure.

Within the family setting, parental negligence and ineffective upbringing contribute significantly to the disorientation of the children. Instead of providing discipline, moral instruction, and emotional support, the family unit is fragmented, leaving the young characters vulnerable to negative external influences. The wider community also fails in its role as a corrective institution. Elders and authority figures who are expected to enforce moral standards appear indifferent or incapable of addressing the rising social disorder. This institutional collapse creates an environment where misconduct thrives unchecked. As events unfold, the consequences of these failures become increasingly tragic. Relationships break

down, social order deteriorates, and characters are confronted with the painful outcomes of their choices and the society's neglect. The emotional tone of sorrow and lamentation runs through the play, reflecting both individual suffering and collective despair.

The play begins with a dance rehearsal prepared to welcome officials coming to support victims of a recent flood that devastated the town. During the gathering, the women take the opportunity to speak on pressing community matters. Their discussion soon raises concerns about corruption and whether flood relief funds will be shared fairly among those who need them. To address this, a group of women decide to visit Ochiora. They want to inform her about how her daughter, Nkechi, is negatively influencing the wider community. Meanwhile, some pensioners take their own stand against the moral decline. They plan to remix well-known philosophical songs, hoping to reshape the mindset of society — particularly the younger generation. Their efforts, however, hit a wall when Ezennia, a key figure in the project, is kidnapped. The crime is eventually traced back to Nkechi and Ikenna, who are arrested and handed over to the authorities. Through the play, Nwabueze argues that the community plays a powerful role in shaping the values and behaviour of young people. In the end, *Lachrymose* serves as a warning — a reminder of what happens when moral responsibility breaks down, and a call for better parenting, social reorientation, and institutions that actually work.

Moral Decadence and the Crisis of Youth Formation

A dominant concern in *Lachrymose* is the moral crisis confronting contemporary Nigerian youths. Nwabueze presents youth delinquency as the outcome of failed socialization rather than an inherent moral defect. Through the interactions of his characters, the playwright demonstrates that when parents, community leaders, and other social institutions neglect their responsibilities, the younger generation becomes vulnerable to moral and social disorientation. When Nkechi becomes wayward, she blames the society for her negative actions. She tells her parents that "what they are doing is a reflection of the legacy bestowed to them by their beloved country" (Nwabueze, 2014 p.31). The young generation therefore, do not see anything wrong with what they are doing. To them, living a wayward life is the preoccupation of the modern society. Stealing for instance, is a normal practice. To Nkechi,

> Nkechi: … It is no longer called stealing. Its nomenclature depends on how and where it is taking place.It is happening in government offices, public and private establishments, and even churches (Nwabueze, 2014, p.31).

The tragic consequences of this neglect are dramatized through the emotional conflicts and regrets that permeate the play (Nwabueze, year, pp. xx–xx). Thus, the playwright locates the source of social instability not merely in the individual but in the collective failure of society to uphold ethical values. This dramatic representation supports the sociological view that literature reflects the moral and institutional realities of its society (Swingewood, 1972). However, it is Nwabueze's dramatic presentation itself that provides the primary evidence for this conclusion.

The Family as Agent of Socialization

One of the central concerns of *Lachrymose* is the failure of the family as a primary agent of socialization. The breakdown of parental guidance leads to distorted value systems among the youth. In sociological terms, the family is responsible for transmitting norms and values.

However, in the play, this function is weakened, resulting in children who lack moral discipline. This reflects Durkheim's argument that when institutions fail to regulate behaviour, society experiences anomie. The consequences are evident in the rebellious and disoriented behaviour of young characters who struggle to differentiate between acceptable and deviant conduct. In the play, Beatrice reminds Ochiora of her responsibility as a mother to bring up her only daughter Nkechi, in a proper way.

BEATRICE:..You have an only daughter, Nkechi. Her waywardness is shameful and it is our duty to call your attention to it If you are unaware of it. You have to call her to order or the result will embarrass all of us. (Nwabueze, 2014, p.21)

According to Aghamelu (2020), the playwright uses the visit of the women to emphasis also that character building is a communal responsibility and should not be left for the parents and care givers alone. This is revealed in the following conversation:

BEATRICE: The wisdom of being a Christian mother is the ability to stand beside your colleagues in periods of stress and difficulty. It entails keeper one being one's sister's keeper

OCHIORA: Is that what you have come to lecture me on?
I'm waiting.

BEATRICE: We have come to talk to you about your daughter, Nkechi...
You have an only daughter, Nkechi. Her waywardness is shameful and it is our duty to call your attention to it if you are not aware...(20-21).

OCHEZE: We are Christian mothers, and it is our duty to protect the integrity of our colleague's daughter. (Nwabueze, 2014,p.19-23)

This conversation confirms the negative position of things in the society, where the youth are taking laws into their hands. Women's motivation. But having seen the troubling direction Nkechi's life is taking, the women consider their visit as a necessary communal responsibility. Their goal is to help her retrace her steps and turn away from her destructive engagements. Through this action, the women in the words of Aghamelu (2014), express their shared concern for Nkechi's character and moral development.

Initially, both Ezennia and Ochiora are unwilling to receive the women visitors. However, recognizing the communal duty behind the visit, Ezennia his position and attempts to persuade his wife to hear the women out. Stressing the need to listen to the women, Ezenniae tells his wife

Ezennia: My dear, whoever sees a fowl shuffling over faeces should drive it away for no one knows who will eat the fowl's leg...(Nwabueze, 2014, p. 26).

Characterization as an Instrument of Social Criticism

Nwabueze constructs his characters as embodiments of competing moral values. Characters who exhibit responsibility, discipline, and integrity serve as ethical models, while those driven by greed, negligence, or indiscipline expose the destructive consequences of moral failure. Through their words and actions, the playwright demonstrates that individual behaviour has

profound implications for communal well-being. Rather than presenting characters as isolated personalities, the play positions them as representatives of broader social attitudes and institutional realities.The characterization therefore reinforces the playwright's didactic purpose, illustrating Achebe's (1975) assertion that African writers assume responsibility for educating and reforming society.

Communal Responsibility and Character Formation

In *Lachrymose*, Nwabueze highlights the need for communal responsibility in character development of young people. The playwright submits that every member of the community has a responsibility to contribute to the moral upbringing of the younger generation. Character formation, therefore, should not be seen as the exclusive duty of parents but as a collective social obligation. This idea is reinforced by Ezennia's assertion that, "...one finger alone cannot catch a louse from the head" (Nwabueze, 2014, P.26). The proverb highlights the necessity of cooperation and collective effort in addressing issues that affect the community.

The proverb further sheds light on Nwabueze's perspective regarding the role of society in shaping the character of youths. It illustrates that a child's moral development is influenced by the combined efforts of parents, relatives, neighbours, and other members of the community. In traditional African society, child upbringing is regarded as a shared responsibility rather than an individual one. Furthermore, the identification of undesirable behaviour depends on the existence of communal standards through which actions are judged as either acceptable or unacceptable.

Through the actions and conversations of his characters, Nwabueze demonstrates that successful character formation requires the establishment of clear rules and moral expectations. The playwright maintains that communities must uphold commonly accepted norms and values that guide the conduct of their members. These standards are reflected in the views expressed by the women in the play. In condemning promiscuity and indiscriminate sexual relationships, the playwright contrasts socially approved behaviour with conduct considered morally unacceptable. This is evident when Omelogo advises Ochiora:

OMELOGO: ...It is better to concentrate on one man...than to jump from one man to another which constitute your daughter's behaviour" (Nwabueze, 2014,p.23).

This statement reveals the community's preference for commitment to a single partner rather than engaging in multiple sexual relationships. The women therefore regard eloping with one man as less reprehensible than the lifestyle associated with Nkechi (Aghamelu, 2020).

The issue of abortion is also addressed as a moral concern within the community. Through the comments of the female characters, Nwabueze portrays abortion as a practice strongly condemned by society. Beatrice expresses this position when she tells Ochiora:

BEATRICE: "...To have a baby at home is better than aborting it.
Abortion is murder. And that is the stock-in-trade of your daughter and her friends (Nwabueze, 2014, p.23).

By incorporating this dialogue, Nwabueze highlights behaviours that the community considers unacceptable and demonstrates the importance of communal vigilance in identifying antisocial tendencies among young people. Such vigilance enables society to intervene before these behaviours become deeply rooted.

The playwright further presents the community as an institution responsible for monitoring and correcting deviant behaviour. Community members are expected to observe the conduct of youths carefully and report concerns to their families. Since many youthful activities occur outside the home, the community serves as an important source of information and guidance for parents. This advisory role is illustrated when Ugodie counsels Ochiora:

UGODIE: You should teach your children to listen to elders and comply with their directions (Nwabueze, 2014, p.12).

Similarly, Beatrice expresses her disappointment with Ochiora's inability to translate his principles into effective parenting:

BEATRICE: ...We are disappointed that your philosophy crumbles when one weighs it with the actual situation of your family" (Nwabueze,2014,p.20).

Beyond concerns about sexual misconduct, the women also accuse Nkechi of corruption. Beatrice informs Ochiora that Nkechi has been "colluding with the officers of the committee to streak and sell materials donated to the flood victims" (Nwabueze, 2014,p.25). Such revelations are intended to help Ochiora address his daughter's misconduct before it leads to more severe consequences. This warning is reinforced by Ocheze, who cautions:

OCHEZE:...you may not know it Ochiora, but ashes are known to fly back into the face of the one who throws them. A wise person does not use the left finger to indicate the direction of his own home(25).

Ocheze's statement serves as a reminder that once the community has fulfilled its responsibility of providing guidance and warning, the family must take appropriate action. Failure to do so may result in unfortunate consequences. This prediction is eventually realized in the play when Nkechi is arrested for masterminding the kidnapping of her own father, demonstrating the dangers of neglecting corrective measures during a child's formative years. In all, the play offers valuable insight into the role of the community in the moral development of young people. Nwabueze portrays the community as an indispensable force in shaping character through its ability to monitor behaviour, uphold societal values, and provide guidance to families.

Conclusion

This study has examined Emeka Nwabueze's Lachrymose as a sociological critique of contemporary African society. Through the lens of sociological literary theory, the play has been shown to dramatize the consequences of weakened institutions, moral decay, and the erosion of communal responsibility. The analysis reveals that the family, which ought to function as the primary agent of socialization, is ineffective in guiding the younger generation. Similarly, community structures and leadership institutions fail to regulate behaviour or enforce moral order. As a result, youths are left vulnerable to deviance and social disorientation.

The study further demonstrates that Lachrymose is not merely a representation of despair but also a reformist text. It calls attention to the urgent need for moral regeneration, responsible governance, and the restoration of social values. In this sense, drama becomes a powerful instrument for social critique and transformation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

Families should reassert their role as primary agents of socialization by providing proper moral guidance and emotional support to children.

Educational institutions should integrate value-based education that emphasizes discipline, ethics, and civic responsibility.

Community leaders and traditional institutions should actively participate in correcting social deviance and promoting communal values.

Government should strengthen social welfare systems that address youth unemployment and social inequality, which often contribute to deviant behaviour.

African dramatists and literary artists should continue to use drama as a tool for social critique and moral reorientation.

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