Sunnie Ododo and his philosophical stance in Hard Choice.

Sikiru Adeyemi Ogundokun

Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities,
College of Humanities and Culture, Ikire Campus, Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria.
Postal Address: P. M. B. 5007, Ikire, Postal Code: 221104, Osun State, Nigeria.
Telephone No: + 2348034359367
E-mail: akorede4sure@gmail.com

Abstract

In spite of many early observations and discussions, political and human situations have remained almost at crossroads. Hence, additional studies on human nature are needed to foster both social and structural transformations in human societies. The aim of this essay is to elucidate Sunnie Ododo’s ideological stance in his play, Hard Choice with a view to suggesting a way of institutionalising value re-orientation for the much needed social advancement in all its ramifications. The study presents an existentialist perspective into the reading and understanding of Ododo’s Hard Choice to underscore the lessons, which can be learnt from the piece of writing. The application of content analysis to the study provides an effective appreciation of the human nature vis-à-vis his existence, which is premised on freedom, choice and responsibility. The remainder of this paper is structured into introduction, theoretical framework, discussion and conclusion.

Key words: Human situation, existentialism, freedom, choice, responsibility.

Introduction

From among the three basic genres of literature; drama, poetry and prose, we have singled out drama as our platform for this study. Drama is the presentation of human history, culture, norms, experiences, imagination, emotions and observations on stage. That is, it is the imitation of life on podium. When drama is documented, it is referred to as a play. One who writes a play is called a playwright. Drama, play and theatre can be interchangeably used because they are intertwined.

Through drama, man understands himself, his world and his roles much better because human being could have a clear picture of being what he is or who he is. Characters in drama have blood and flesh. Theatre then is an arena. One of the earliest that we know of in which man has attempted to come to terms with the spatial phenomenon of his being (Soyinka, 1976). People really see themselves in dramatic works more practically than in any other forms of art. Wright (1972; Azeez, 2001: 366) drawing some strength from Goethe, says: “The only time that man recognizes himself is when he sees himself in others.” And, drama makes this possible.

Art, a made to believe material, is a creative entity. The formalists/structuralists hold that art is for its own sake. They are comfortable with the view that the beauty of any piece of art is in its language disposition, exploration or colouration. In other words, the language component of an art, which explains its aesthetic potency, becomes something to behold according to the exponents of formalist/structuralist schools of thought. However, those who believe in the sociological approach to art, which literature is a part of, are of the opinion that art, in whatever form, is not solely for its own sake. The sociologists of the art, as it were, believe that art is a product of a particular human culture. Consequently, art is intended to touch life. Simply put, the art is expected to perform certain functions so as to move human society forward.

Justifying the argument of the followers of the sociological approach, the art is perceived to be a means of communication of ideas, experiences and findings. It is also conceived as a means of teaching moral lessons, a means of transmitting culture, tradition and civilization as well as a channel to fight against conducts, attitudes, behaviours and practices which are adjudged unacceptable in human societies.

One is also convinced that art, apart from giving the pleasure of mind through its aesthetic properties by entertaining its audience(s), provides job opportunities for many people and thereby reduces poverty in various human societies. For instance, actors, actresses, journalists, broadcasters, singers, musicians, drummers, dancers, fine artists and teachers of literature, only to mention but a few, feed and make their living from the large pot of art. It is upon this background that art is for the sake of life we investigate the existentiality of man in Ododo’s Hard Choice, by exploring the playwright’s ideological position.

Theoretical Framework

There are several critical theories but existentialist theory provides the framework for this study. Existentialism as a theory holds that human beings are free and responsible for their own actions. That is, the practice of the philosophy of “free will”. Characters in existentialist texts are allowed to make their choices as well as to assume absolute responsibility for their actions. Individual existence, freedom and choice are the major concerns of writers who believe in the application of this theory. To existentialists, however, only human being exist, other creatures such as plants, animals and other life realities do not exist (Omorogbe, 2012: 3). According to Wallace (2009: 69) “existentialist philosophy posits that humans are beings that create and define themselves in interactions with others.” Creating and defining the concept of “self” is however, attainable only when man is capable of making conscious choices, decisions and set goals as well as when he is prepared to accept responsibility for his actions both in the course of pursuing the set goals and after they are achieved. It is equally important to add that whether or not an individual makes a choice, existentialists believe there is already a
choice. To make this more explicit, when a man decides what to do, it is a choice and when he refuses to make a decision on what to do, it also represents a choice because it is the man (an individual) who has chosen not to choose. There is virtually no sitting on the fence or being indifferent on issues in existentialism concerning choice making.

Discussion

The existentialists conceive freedom as identical with human existence. It is believed to be an in-born trait of every man. In Sunnie Ododo’s *Hard Choice*, it is obvious that all the characters enjoy a high degree of natural freedom. The freedoms these characters enjoy permit them to make certain choices and decisions with little or no restrictions. Nevertheless, the possibility to make free decisions is bottled up in the readiness to accept responsibility for any action, which is taken by every individual.

Choice is a process of selecting or picking what is considered to be the best from available alternatives. This process brings about what the economists described as alternative forgone or opportunity cost. Man, therefore, is the designer of his own life since he has the liberty to pick for himself what he considers the most useful option. And, the only thing every man has hundred percent control of is his mind. Hence, it is sufficient to say that man’s destiny is in his hands. We shall illustrate, with three characters in Ododo’s *Hard Choice* the choices that are made at different times for different reasons.

First, Queen Amaka made a choice that her child, princess Azingae dies and returns to the gods, Oguguru on her wedding day as an exchange for solution to problem her husband, Eze Okiakoh faced when the coronation rites of the latter was delayed some years back because a step brother, who could claim right to the throne unexpectedly appeared. Queen Amaka traded with the life of her child for the position of a traditional ruler on behalf of her husband to avoid the pains and molestation of losing the crown might cause them.

Secondly, for political reason; to promote mutual understanding, co-operation and peace existence between his people, the Igbos and their Yoruba neighbours, Eze Okiakoh of Emepiri Kingdom made a choice to give his daughter to Prince Oki of Igedu Kingdom. Frankly speaking, this choice to tie nuptial knots, with the motive of uniting two ethic nationalities is laudable and can be described as a mark of patriotism.

Thirdly, Princess Azingae made up her mind to be the sacrificial lamb to appease the gods to prevent imminent war and protect the lives of millions and the generations unborn. By and large, to avert trouble in our land, the writer holds that somebody must pay the price.

These choices are indeed hard ones as the title of the play denotes, whether well-intended or not. Princess affirms thus:

> Tonight I shall carry the burden of Emepiri Kingdom to the gods so that war is averted and lives saved (p. 46)

For example, as a social and contemporary reality, former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan made a hard choice by accepting defeat in the April 2015 Presidential elections to avert political impasse or perhaps another civil war in Nigeria because in a characteristic manner of African leaders as the incumbent, he could choose to reject the outcome of the said election and this would have spelled doom for the country.

But, taking responsibility for one’s actions demands a lot of courage. The heroine of this play, Princess Azingae is very brave. She says: “I’m resolved to face the worst. If offering me as a sacrifice to Oguguru would avert the imminent war and save the lives of millions, then I am ready to be sacrificed” (p. 42). There is a demonstration of bravery in Princess Azingae like in ex-President Jonathan. Although the Princess appears to be a victim of circumstance, she assumes responsibility for the miscalculations of her mother.

As a matter of fact, the writer practically points out that in state matters, domestic emotions cannot be tolerated (p. 19). It is also evident that there is always conflict of interest (p. 15) and there is no permanent friend (p. 29). The life is full of contradictions. The irony of life is contained in the conversation between Guard I and Guard II as shown below:

**GUARD II:** What a pity. Life is so full of contradictions; to think that only two weeks ago we were here to tie nuptial knots, to ensure that the friendship between the two kingdoms is strengthened. An unfathomable omen strikes and now war is looming. I pray a solution is found fast before daggers are drawn.

**GUARD I:** Is it that alone? Recall that two decades ago when Emepiri kingdom was about to be annexed by Tanaka warriors, it was our army that came to their rescue on the invitation of the Eze.

However, to protect their image and integrity, the Igedu people have issued a threat of war to their aged long friends, the Emepiris to reclaim the abducted crown of their king. The crown stands as the symbol of authority. A king without a crown is like a masquerade without his mask.

Moreso, the playwright believes the gods can be challenged provided human beings are not self-centred in their own quests too. In other words, people must keep their promises and live up to expectations. This claim can be supported with the message content of the dialogue between Chinelo and Princess, which runs thus:

**CHINELO:** Why did you choose to do it. . . to give your life for the crown?

**PRINCESS:** The gods decided and I accepted.

**CHINELO:** Can’t they (the gods) be questioned? (Emphasis is ours).
PRINCESS: Yes, they can, but human beings are selfish. We ask questions with predetermined answers. When the gods speak in discordance with our expectations, we proceed to ask new question until it becomes so difficult to even interpret the answers.

Ododo, speaking of Princess Azingae, expresses existentialist ideology thus:

Oki my love, with these coral beads I decorate you to reaffirm the vision we both share. With them I relieve you of the burden of my absence and guarantee a flourishing presence of the dream we both represent. (Places them on his neck.) Wear them as a constant reminder to all that a man’s destiny is the choice he makes (p. 48). (Emphasis is ours). As we have pointed out earlier in this paper, the existentialist thinkers believe that man is the architect of his life and all that has to do with it.

Still on ideology, there some traces of feminism in the play. The women of Ododo are evidently more militant and determined than the men. While Prince Oki is suggesting an escape, that is, to elope into a self-exile, the Princess is ready to stay at home and face the music. Princess explains that they could not escape from their shadows (p. 46). Queen also laments as follows:

What has become of our men? Hardly can you find one again that can fight for a cause to a logical end. It’s either they cave in when they come under little pressure or they’re victims of banana peels (p. 40). The Queen indigns the men for their weak mindedness, lack of will and purpose. What a reversal of role!

Speaking through the Queen in the play, the writer thinks politics is not for refined and polished individuals, especially in Africa both in the traditional setting and the current dispensation. No wonder, refined Nigerians like M. K. O. Abiola, Kudirat Abiola and recently James Ocholi were consumed by the political intrigues of the Nigerian politics. The mental picture of this scenario is better captured in the conversation between Eze Okiaoh of Emepiri kingdom and his wife, Queen Amaka.

EZE OKIAKOH: Amaka, aah Amaka, so you’re responsible for the sudden death of my step brother? Amaka, why, why didn’t you discuss with me first, Amaka?

QUEEN: (She comports herself and braces up.) If I did, you wouldn’t have been the Eze today because you are too polished for traditional politics (p. 44).

Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine that tallies in with feminism, emphasizing that man is an individual, his freedom and responsibility, his possibility to make choices without any constraint (Andronne, 2012: 173; Ejechi, 2014: 1). From the above extract, we can confidently paint Queen Amaka of Emepiri as a radical feminist and an “iron lady”, who does not take non-sense for an answer. She is in fact, a revolutionist of a sort. The Queen takes responsibility for her actions by facing Eze Okiaokh boldly gives reasons for the choices she has made. The lesson from all of these is that men and women should be prepared at all times to accept responsibility for their actions and in-actions. All forms of treachery, traitorous tendencies and egotism must be avoided while the spirit of team work and patriotism, which will crave for societal advancement, should be encouraged. As it stands, we need to rekindle our battered values through re-orientation and re-assessment of our actions, policies and mind set.

By large, if drama represents human beings in action, the issue of characterisation is important in the reading of a given text. The way and manner a creator portrays his fictional persons and assigns them roles is known as characterisation. Ododo allows his readers to know what the characters do by determination and by impulse. He reveals the self-discovery and self-realisation of the major characters. In the play, Ododo’s Hard Choice, the characters’ reactions to the stimulus of their environment are the motivating factors for their actions. The playwright can in effect, be seen as a feminist-existentialist when we carefully periscope the character traits of not only Queen Amaka but also that of her daughter, Princess Azingae. A well developed plot and a skillful method of characterisation contribute to the artistic success of the writer. The appropriate application of these stylistic features also confirms the expertise of our playwright.

Finaly, this play, Ododo’s Hard choice, further explains the interconnectivity between literature and reality. The combination of fact and fiction, which is described as “faction” in literary parlance, then becomes relevant. Literature is fundamentally seen as a creative art, which makes use of words to x-ray events and actions in human societies. The characters are not real; they are fictive persons. However, the resemblance between the fictive personalities and some real renowned individuals especially in politics, traditional institutions and business accords a degree of fact to literature. Reality in literature can be also traced to the use of some proper nouns which are similar to existing villages, towns, cities, countries or ethnic groups. This “regard croisé”, which presents literature as whether it has something to share with real life or not, is one major variable that makes Art an interesting venture.

Conclusion

This study has focused on freedom, choice and responsibility as advocated for by the theory of existentialism and as demonstrated in Sunnie Ododo’s Hard Choice. We have attempted to explicate the ideological base of the playwright so that readers can draw some lessons from the artist’s perception of life. Of all the choices traded upon in the play, the choice to lay down one’s life for the sake one’s people in order to guide against tribulation such as war or the wrath of the gods is the most outstanding choice in the story. It is indeed Christ-like! The author’s central ideas are evidences of his existentialist ideology and we submit that art, literature in our own case, has a serious role to play in making human life much more meaningful.

Without any doubt, it is clear that the world needs the Arts and the Humanities as an essential complement to the perceived structural transformations achieved through science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) so that
the world will not return to a crossroad. Remember, it is the Humanities that will help us to understand the nature of man, his mind set and purpose for his actions. Value reconstruction, character reformation and renegotiation for good governance and global peace as well as social mobilisation for international co-operation can only come from the Humanities and not the STEM.

References


