

ABSURDIST DRAMA AND THEATRE OF COMMITMENT IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *KING BAABU*

Kester Nnaemeka Dibia

CDDSIU-SEEFOR,

(World Bank and European Union Assisted),

Opposite Government House,

Anwai Road, Asaba-Delta State

Kesterdibia02@gmail.com

Abstract

Existence is absurd because it is characterized by purposelessness, chaos, disorderliness, anguish, illogicality and hopelessness. Hence, Albert Camus, a French essayist and playwright captures this in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* where the gods condemned Sisyphus to rolling a stone up a hill only to have it roll down upon getting to the summit of the hill. The problem of this study therefore is the semblance of the science and technological engagement of the modern man as equally futile task. Hence, the paper aims to explain that absurdism captures this man's futile search for some meaning, direction, purpose or order and fulfillment. Objectives of study include to ascertain why this purposeful or meaningful existence that man craves for continues to elude him and why despondency has continued to dog the existence of man as mankind has consistently failed to achieve its aim of making provision for a logical and perfect existence, considering the numerous failures that characterise mankind's plans, missions. The study also evaluates absurdist theatre's level of commitment to reformation, transformation and change in a positive direction amidst this apparent failure of man. Using the content analysis approach of the qualitative research method; this paper examines Wole Soyinka's absurdist drama- *King Baabu* as a drama of commitment to interrogate the commitment and effectiveness of absurdist drama. The researcher concluded that the absurdist drama with its peculiar methodology is capable of reforming the society. Hence, he recommends the publication of more absurdist drama to revive the declining absurdist theatre.

Introduction

The plays that make up the theatre of the absurd highlight the futility of all actions and the pointlessness of all directions. Absurdism emerged as a philosophical movement around the 19th and the 20th century. The term,

theatre of the absurd describes plays with absurdist conventions. It is a designation for plays written by a number of playwrights in the 1940s, 50s, 60s, up to the recent times. Absurdism is credited to the 19th century Danish Philosopher, Soren Kierkagaad. Absurdism, is a belief system that is born out of the existentialist movement when the French philosopher and playwright, Albert Camus published his work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*; the *Myth of Sisyphus* is Camus' foremost work on absurdism. In it, he considers absurdity as a confrontation, an opposition, a conflict or a 'divorce' between two ideals.

The philosophy behind the absurd theatre portrays human beings as always making efforts to make meaning out of the existential essence of man. The theatre of the absurd as espoused by Albert Camus, who lived from 1913 to 1960, is used to describe or denote a human situation that is out of tune and out of harmony with reason; a situation that is completely found to be illogical and incongruous with logical and rational existence. Hence, man resorts to filling the gap with a purpose set forth by higher powers, often a belief in supernatural powers, often represented by God or the gods. Emeka Nwabueze states that:

The concept of absurdism maintains that human life and experiences evoke notions of absurdity, leaving the individual with choices comprising suicide, a leap of faith or recognition. Recognition is the only defensible option open to man in his struggles to find meaning in a meaningless existence. Suicide as an option, is an admission that life is not worth living and offers a way out to the absurdity of living in a meaningless, illogical universe... The leap of faith is an escape from rationality, and is, in fact, a philosophical suicide, which should be rejected along with physical suicide. (132)

Rational philosophers like Plato and Aristotle are unanimous in their informed opinions that situations or events must be premised on logic and rationality. On the other hand, absurdist theorists are of the opinion that mankind has not been able to make provisions for or achieve logical existence hence what mankind is faced with are layers of illogicality as emergent outcomes of numerous failures that characterise human plans and missions. For example, the need for comfortable means of transport has led scientists to invent and produce motor cars, aircrafts, the rail and marine transport systems. But ironically, these inventions have turned out to become sources of human destruction and misery. For example, if aircrafts and warships are not being used in conflict situations by the Air-Force and Navy Personnel to destroy the lives and property of those

identified as insurgents or enemies, we are having crashes and other related disasters. In the opinion of absurdists therefore, mankind is back to square one as what was invented to bring about comfort and progress for man and ensure a meaningful existence for him has turned out to become sources of danger, misery and anguish. Therefore, while rationalists believe that rationality and the true scale of good keep the world in perfect harmony, absurdists nurse strong doubts about the capability of man to pursue and achieve such harmony and goodness to be able to lead a logical existence that is completely devoid of hopelessness, chaos or disorderliness. Ubong Nda opines that the absurdist theatre emerged after the second world war as :

... an unconditional springing up of dramatic thoughts... The appellation "theatre of the absurd" was coined by Martin Esslin, a drama critic from a quotation in the *Myth of Sisyphus* written by the renowned French dramatist and philosopher, Albert Camus (1913-1960). The philosopher/dramatist asserts that the contemporary world has lost the comfort and security of explaining the world based on reason and logic. (16)

In his play entitled *King Baabu*, Wole Soyinka presents a ruler known as Basha who, through his actions and utterances only succeeds in portraying himself as an absolutist ruler who is only interested in achieving his personal aggrandizement at the expense of the welfare and well-being of his people or subjects. Sociologically, absolutism denotes a political system or regime in which the ruler is not constrained in the exercise of power either by custom or rule of law. Thus, the ruler's will in this regard, is constantly turned into action. To achieve his ambition of advancing his personal aggrandizement, *King Baabu* stops at nothing, including violence against his people and selfish appropriation of national wealth to himself. King Baabu paints a clearer picture of his retrogressive agenda against his people and his intention to milk the treasury of his country dry when he states that "... but I think as long as he thinks I give him banking cow to milk, he remaining loyal. Trouble begin when he see that I intend to milk banking cow myself. All national cow in fact... (37). As a leader whose government thrives on corruption, financial debauchery and violence, King Baabu states that:

... King Baabu the bountiful say spend it all. Spend every last penny of spanking Guatuna currency, Pa Baabu going to feed all his children today so burst your throats as much as you want with food and drink but Papa Baabu going to make you all work for it later, you bet! (49)

A number of playwrights including Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Nigeria's Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka to mention a few, have, without doubt drawn inspiration from the absurdist philosophy that hinges on observed illogicality, disharmony, hopelessness, purposelessness and directionlessness that characterise human existence. Various techniques used by these playwrights show that the absurdist dramatist has succeeded in conditioning the audience to accept modern theatre techniques of simplification, suggestion and distortion as basic theatrical techniques. To achieve this, Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfish state that "Absurdist playwrights present our existence including human relationships and human language as futile or non-sensical. To reinforce this theme, they use seemingly illogical dramatic techniques" (348). They go further to contend that even the structure of absurdist plays appears to differ essentially from the plays of the preceding period. They posit that absurdist plays do not "... have either traditional climatic structure or episodic structure. Frequently, nothing seems to happen, the plot moves in a circle, concluding in the same way it began (348).

Consequently, absurdist dramas have come to portray the world in this circle and confused manner with mankind adrift in a neutral universe where truth is lack of logic, order and certainty. Hence Femi Shaka observes that:

... Psychology had shown increasingly that many of man's most powerful motivations are subconscious and cannot be deduced from purely external signs. The absurdist drama is thus part of the movements to redefine the world in which we live. (10)

The theatre of commitment which also embodies absurdist drama emerged out of the need to put an end to the oppression and social injustices that Africans were subjected to by Europeans or white minority leaders especially in South Africa during the apartheid regime. The theatre of commitment points to the glaring fact that there are ample and compelling evidence all around us that most socio-political systems and governments, especially in third world countries like Nigeria, have failed to demonstrate enough commitment towards keeping violence and social injustices in their various shades and colours, exemplified by oppression, suppression, and so on, within decent bounds. Nigeria's Ola Rotimi once stated that he wrote *Holding Talks* , an absurdist play, to portray the lack of commitment of governments at all levels and the society generally, to the well-being of the people. Ahmed Yerima states that Rotimi had been "dismayed at a growing propensity, a penchant of our universe today for jaw-jawing...

there's so much talking and less positive action these days..." (5). The theatre of commitment is concerned with bringing about positive changes in the society. It is a form of theatre that seeks to cater for the needs and aspirations of the down-trodden in the society. It is interested in and committed to addressing the various forms of social injustices or oppression which the less privileged in the society are subjected to. It is essentially, an instrument of or a catalyst for social change and development.

Essentially, theatre of commitment came into being through experiments from realism which the dramatist employed to portray his environment as it is. Theatre of commitment is obsessed with bringing about the required change in the society. Theatre of commitment is committed to catering for the well-being of the masses hence Festus Iyayi posits that:

... it is the society, the type of economic and hence the political system which we are operating in our country today that brutalises the individual, rapes his manhood. It is necessary that all the oppressed sections of our community ought to take up arms to overthrow the present oppressive system. The system that has already proved that it operates through violence... (185)

Absurdist drama and theatre of commitment are two sides of the same coin. The absurdist theatre is a multiform theatre with inherent reformative potentials that can sensitise the people. It is committed to exposing the ills or iniquities of the society and the purposelessness that characterises man's existence and then spurs him to action. Many absurdist dramatists remain committed in a wide range of plays with absurdist characteristics like characters caught in hopeless situations, forced to carry out repetitive or meaningless tasks or actions, dialogue full of clichés, play on words or the use of pun. The plot of many absurdist plays feature characters in interdependent pairs. The characters may be roughly equal or have a begrudging interdependence. One character may be clearly dominant or may torture the passive character as in Ola Rotimi's *Holdings Talks* where Man is the domineering character who tortures Barber till he dies. Man eventually shifts the torture to Apprentice. Generally, absurdist use these techniques to portray a chaotic society, a universe that is adrift and a degenerated mankind. According to Robert Cohen:

... Going beyond the use of symbols and the fantasy and poetry of other non-realists the absurdist have distinguished themselves by employing in their dramas, for example, clocks that clang incessantly, characters that eat pap in ashcan, corpses that grow by

the minute and personal interactions that are belligerently non-credible.
(263)

In *King Babuu*, Wole Soyinka uses this master/servant absurdist technique. The domineering character in the play is known as Maariya, though responsible for Basha's predicament, lashes out at him below:

Maariya: He's blabbering. That special blabbering when he's scared shitless, don't I just know it?.. Oh dear, I bet... I knew it. Turn around!

Basha: (*backs away*) I don't want to. Let me alone.

Maariya: You're disgusting! If you think I am going to keep washing your soiled pants for you any time you're scared... Go and clean up at once. I don't want any of your subordinates to see you as you really are.

Basha: (*Walking out backwards*) Nothing here to clean up, but I wanting to visit toilet anyway. I have the runs. All other beings not like you who get stone for stomach. The rest of us human, have to run sometime or other. Something call obeying call of nature.

Maariya: Are you still here? Next time I'll really let the news leak out to the soldiers how their general leaks into his pants. You think I am joking?

Fatasimu! (*Basha scuttles off*). (9)

As a further demonstration of her domineering character, Maariya goes further to threaten Basha that she will expose him to the ridicule of his subordinates if he fails to topple the military regime headed by General Potipoo! She states that "... if he doesn't come round to my plans, that's one threat I won't hesitate to use. All's fair in love and war- that's what they all say, fair is foul and foul is fair... (10)

Plots in absurdist plays are usually cyclical. *Endgame*, for example begins where the play ends- some lines at the beginning respond to some lines at the end and then the reader is led to safely assume that each day the same actions will take place.

Theatre of commitment on the other hand, can be said to be hinged on radical methodological approaches of absurdism. It is a theatre that is concerned with enthroning positive changes in the society and radicalism is simply a catalyst for change, be it social, political or economic. Theatre

of commitment is an ideological term that is used to identify political radicalism hence, Saint Gbilekaa contends that:

... radicalism in Nigeria's dramaturgical art is a product of colonial imperialism as well as socio-economic developments in independent Nigeria. It started as a protest... thus in the 1970s, beginning with the plays of Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Lole Omotosho, this protest changed gear from mere political satire to total ideological commitment on the part of the artiste. (48)

The salient message contained in the quotation above is that dramatists or artistes engaged in the theatre of commitment to launch a crusade for change in the society must work collectively in order to transform the society for the good of all.

King Baabu as an Absurdist Play

According to Oscar Brocket as quoted by Ubong Nda:

Structurally, absurdist plays are characterised by the disjointed scenes that are bound together by a common theme, rather than a sequential arrangement where one thing leads to another... This structural disorientation is borne out of the absurdist's insistence that life is not orderly and sequential, and that the cause to effect arrangement ascribed to life by rationalists does not exist in reality. (25)

King Baabu is typically absurdist in structure. It has a succession of scenes or episodes with the selfish, calculative and over-ambitious Maariya dominating affairs. Arising from this structural deficiency, the characters in *King Baabu* are like automatons. Like most absurdist characters, not much is known about the past of Basha Bash, Maariya and indeed, any of the other characters. Maariya attempts to disclose some information about the background of Basha as a former goatherd and a coupist who has been involved in several coup plotting and execution in the past. Beyond that, nothing else is known about him. This type of characterisation is the absurdist playwright's way of portraying characters in absurdist plays as robots without such luxuries as biographies, background or sequential existence. Basha also presents himself to his people as a kind, caring and generous father of all his people. He states that "...Pa Baabu going to feed all his children today, so burst your throats as much as you want with food and drinks... (49. As a ruler, Baabu is anything but kind, caring and generous as in almost the same breath, he says "... but Papa Baabu going

to make you all work for it later, you bet” (49). This is a typical absurdist technique of depicting man’s inability to be truly what he professes to be.

In Africa, governance is characterised by mindless financial debauchery whereby government officials steal and spend money from government’s coffers recklessly. The playwright shows that we have not been able to extricate ourselves from this malaise when King Baabu says “... I’m thinking now, to be bountiful. Give me one box of spanking new Guatuna notes. Time I do some spraying with my own hands... hold on, my loyal subjects, Papa Baabu going to show bountiful hand to his children” (49). Earlier, Maariya had informed the people that the leader had nothing, having sold his assets and distributing the money realised as proceeds from the sale of his assets to all citizens. She however, admits to Basha that “... Those are mint- fresh bank notes I ordered in your name this morning. Why would I forge bank notes when I can forge your signature?” (46).

The playwright, has by this confession from Maariya, highlighted the fact that in our society, the leadership is neck-deep in corruption, dishonesty, deceit and anything but exemplary. It is an evil cycle of squander mania as successive governments or administrations, irrespective of their brand names, whether military or civilian, are always worse than previous ones as demonstrated by poor management of the nation’s resources. In the opinion of the playwright, therefore, we are back to square one as Basha’s new regime is not better than or even positively different from the previous ones headed by Rajinda or Potipoo whose tenures as heads of government at various times can best be described as a web of deceits, lies, intrigues and corruption.

The playwright also employs clichés as part of absurdist’s bid to show the mechanical and colloquial nature of language communication which manifests in insincerity and untruthfulness that characterise the process of human communication. Tikim refers to Basha as “the people’s redeemer” (41). Rout also states that “Fellow citizens, we present... Basha the man of the moment. Basha the man of the masses. Basha the champion of the oppressed” (41). But the truth is that Basha is anything but the people’s redeemer. The playwright uses the praise-singing roles played by Tikim and Rout to underline the insincerity inherent in the praises that followers of leaders in Africa, especially those handling the Information Ministry or those tagged Chief Press Secretaries shower on their principals in their desperation to keep their jobs. That is why they will tell the people that certain health policies, for instance, which are funded through deductions

from workers' salaries, are for the benefit of the masses whereas such policies are designed and executed purposely to enrich certain individuals within the corridors of power. Therefore, "Basha the people's redeemer" or "Basha the champion of the oppressed", and so on, are all slogans that have been observed only in the breach by our leaders who come to the people with promises of redemption and a brighter future only to end up redeeming their private pockets and those of their cronies and family members. This is why many countries in Africa, including Nigeria, are impoverished and are deep-neck in debt.

In most cases, the dialogue in absurdist plays is purposely elliptical. Very often, the issues that characters in absurdist plays should address are replaced by ellipses or dashes as exemplified by the following dialogue:

Baabu: I know longest time I must not only kill this woman but disembowel her with a rusty bayonet...

Maariya: First listen to the beautiful music coming from down there
...

Crowd: If this is King Baabu... Baabu! Baabu! Father of the nation
...

Basha: (*Screaming*) I not fathering anybody here. I not Papa Baabu and I not Baabu the Bountiful. Stop them Tikim... (4)

Much of the dialogue in absurdist plays is characterised by this kind of evasiveness and inability to make a connection. Distinctively, absurdist language is characterised by meaningless clichés, play on words and use of meaningless expressions. The following dialogue between Basha and Kpoki is typical of absurdist language:

Basha: Gentlemen, gentlemen, officers and gentlemen, the government escaping a very narrow escape.

Kpoki: From what?

Basha: From treachery and butchery, from stratagems and mayhems, from catastrophe and apostrophe. We would all have met butchery in our beds or else butchery would have met us on the road. We were for the high jump from Potipoo downwards... (33)

As in the above examples, meaningless clichés or play on words are usually used in absurdist theatre to portray the limits of language while 'questioning or parodying the determinism of science and the knowability of truth'.

***King Baabu* as a Drama of Commitment**

King Baabu just like other absurdist plays dramatises the absurdity and crisis that characterise human existence. Wole Soyinka may have come to the realisation that what he and other absurdist playwrights have been taught about social order, cohesion, fair play and warnings about planning for the next hour and posterity or rather, the popular maxim of “saving for the rainy day” may have been illusions or delusions when compared with the realities of the human situation. No doubt, they, just like the rest of us, have heard about fair play, equity and social justice only to be confronted with a preponderance of oppression, suppression, human rights abuses and pervasion or miscarriage of justice, most times encouraged by the insensitivity of the upper or ruling class. Commenting on the myriad of socio-economic problems plaguing the nation, Nnamdi Azikiwe of blessed memory declared that “... faulty social organisation was mainly responsible for crime, prostitution and all other vices... our society must be treated like an individual to prevent it from becoming a victim of pathological factors...” (121)

The theme of man’s dishonest nature is underscored in *King Baabu* when Basha invites representatives of the civilian populace to lunch in his residence. They are Rout, Dope and Rent. Basha (*King Baabu*) states that:

Your Emnes! And Highness! And Comrade Rout- please come back, come back. It looks as if our dear wife has prepared special lunch to welcome you as personal guests of Chief of Army Staff. She thinking surely you deserve better than army cooking. Please, follow my orderly, he will take you to our guest dining room. Wish I coming with you but this emergency... my C-in-C waiting for me. (21)

However, in actual fact, this invitation to lunch as “personal” guests of the Chief of Army Staff is a camouflage for a coup being hatched up all because of man’s greed and inordinate quest for wealth and position. This therefore, strongly indicates that trust, sincerity and honesty have since eroded the nation as part of the crises of human existence while fear and pessimism have been entrenched. Soyinka also highlights the social problems of corruption and greed when Maariya attempts to beguile the people by painting her husband, Basha, as an egalitarian and benevolent leader. She states that:

... The new leader has nothing left because he has given away all he has. To you, the people, Operation Fill the Stomach has already begun to yield full harvest. Look at those twenty fat cows tethered to

the trees. They are all for you. Eat and drink till day break. There is food for everyone... There is pito and palm wine, burukutu and kainkain for everyone... And you'll have three days on which to recover because he has declared a three-day national holiday... Those huge vats over there are rice and beans and chicken and pork for everyone. That other side is for Muslims-no pork will be served there. And vegetables for vegetarians on that side. No meat or fish. We have laid out enough eggs to... Yes, plenty for the stomach but also something for the pockets... This is what he owns in this world and he has sworn to take none of it to the other world. This is a leader who is truly baabu but who is the Most bountiful of living spirits. (*Empties boxes of notes over the heads of the crowd. A mad scramble for the cash.*) (46)

However, this picture painted of Basha by Maariya sharply contrasts with an earlier one painted by Basha of himself as a greedy and corrupt leader who is determined to bleed the nation dry. He states that "Moriya, husband and whole family can all go to hell. Wait till Basha start digging into that bottomless pot of crude with these very hands right down to the elbow and up the stinking armpits..." (7). Then on page 37 Basha goes further to paint himself as a corrupt, insensitive and greedy leader when he states that "... But I think as long as he think I give him banking cow to milk, he remaining loyal. Trouble begin when he see that I intend to milk banking cow myself. All national cow in fact..."

Nigeria and indeed so many other African countries have at one time or the other experienced dictatorship. Dictatorial regimes are characterised by their uncanny tendencies to oppress and suppress popular opinions, especially the opinions coming from those that such dictatorial regimes have tagged "the opposition". Dictators do not accommodate criticisms and suggestions no matter how constructive they may be. Basha exhibits these characteristics especially during a meeting with bank managers.

During the meeting, Basha makes attempts to compel the bank managers through their spokesman, who is also the managing director of Sankofa Heritage Bank of Guatu to sign an open cheque. This is revealed in the following dialogue:

Spokesman: But this is the same cheque that ex-Brigadier General, Chief Tikim has been trying to get us to sign.

Baabu: Yes. Is own cheque book for your bank, not so? You saying you have no confidence in your own cheque book?

Spokesman: Your majesty, this is still an open cheque?

Baabu: What your trouble? I think you hear me say from now on we all running open government? Everything must be done in the open, that is why we holding this enquiry in full view of public so no one complaining anybody making bad business behind back of public. You sign open cheque.

Spokesman: But we have to account to our shareholders and investors... (55)

In his reaction, Baabu screams “too much grammar I am hearing this morning and is all taking place on empty stomach” (55). He goes a step further to direct his henchman, Bhieu to “shove this fool into open pit” (55).

The impatience and intolerance that Basha exhibits during the meeting are characteristic of dictators who often times are too impatient to accommodate contrary views, no matter how rational such views may be.

Conclusion

The study reveals that the absurdist playwright has made great efforts to expose the despondency that characterises human existence and situation. The play has successfully shown that mankind has failed woefully to make provision for a logical and perfect existence, considering numerous failures that characterise mankind’s plans, missions, inventions and evolutions which are originally aimed at improving the lot of man. *King Baabu* can therefore, simply be said to have successfully artistically instigated doubts on the feasibility of sound reasoning and logicity.

Through content analysis of the play, the researcher is able to reveal that part of the absurdity of man and his follies are traceable to his hypocritical attitude, pompous nature and insensitivity of the leadership class to the plight of the less privileged. The study has therefore, succeeded in bringing to us the playwright’s use of absurdist drama as a committed theatre to critically examine rationalism. According to Ubong Nda, “the level of pessimism unleashed on humanity by this school of thought in the bid to write off rational thought is too dangerous for human development. The strength of the absurdist pessimism is such that is capable of creating a despondent humanity. A mankind that no more strives, hopes and plans for tomorrow...” (29)

The researcher concludes that absurd theatre has high level of commitment; thus, the absurdist playwright should use his drama as a tool for reformation, transformation and positive change that will usher in a better society. Then the image of the theatre as a seriously inclined medium of change rather than an entertainment medium would have been enhanced.

Works Cited

- Azikiwe, Nnamdi. *My Odyssey*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1970.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Endgame*. United Kingdom: Faber & Faber Publishers, 2009.
- Camus, Albert, "The Myth of Sisyphus". *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Ransom House, 1955:88-91.
- Hodgson, John. *The Uses of Drama*. London: Eyre Methuen Publishers, 1972.
- Iyayi, Festus. *Violence*. Ikeja: Longman, 1979.
- Nda Ubong. "Ola Rotimi's Holding Talks, An Absurdist's Question Mark on Rational Discourse in Ola Rotimi's Drama and Theatre, Issues and Perspectives". ed. Bakare Ojo Rasaki. Nigeria: Roots Books and Journals, 2007.
- Nwabueze, Emeka. *Studies in Dramatic Literature*. Enugu: ABIC Books, 2011.
- Robert, Cohen. *Teatre-Brief Version*. USA: Moyfield Publishers, 1980.
- Rotimi, Ola, *Holding Talks*. Ibadan: University Press, 1979.
- Saint Gbilekaa. *Theatre and Political Change in Nigeria since Independence in Theatre and Politics in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Calton Publications, 1993.
- Shaka, Femi. *The Avant-Garde Drama*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 1994.
- Soyinka, Wole. *King Baabu*. London: Methuen Publishers, 2002.
- Wilson, Edwin and Alvin, GoldFarb. *The Theatre Experience*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002.
- Yerima, Ahmed. *Basic Techniques in Playwriting*. Nigeria: Kraft Books, 2004.