

THE ELDER AND THE YOUTH: INTER-GENERATIONAL CONFLICT IN EMEKA NWABUEZE'S *ECHOES OF MADNESS*

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Abstract

The future is always said to belong to the youths. It is also a general acceptance that the formation of the youth is the sole responsibility of the elders. Over the past decades, many studies have advanced our knowledge of cross-generational relationship but not much has been said about the conflicting issues in such relationship. However, since conflict is 'a phenomenon that is an important part of human existence'', every relationship is bound to have a conflicting point. Scholars are beginning to recognize that some attitudes exhibited by the older generation in their relationship with the youths tend to alienate the young ones, thereby incapacitating their potentials and zeal for participating fully in the nation's development processes. This short discourse therefore is an attempt to examine some conflicting issues that exist in the relationship between the elder and the youth as seen in the play, *Echoes of Madness* by Emeka Nwabueze. In the course of the study, it was observed that many conflicts exist in this relationship. If these conflicting points are not adequately handled, they could lead to a disastrous end for both parties, which in the long run affects the society negatively.

Keywords: Elder, Youth, Conflict, *Echoes of Madness*

Introduction

As a result of the campaign for youth awareness and re-orientation in Nigeria, there has been an explosion of interest on issues concerning the youths. Youth observers are beginning to recognize that attitudes exhibited by the older generation tend to alienate the younger ones in the society thereby incapacitating their potentials and zeal for participating fully in the nation's developmental process. Commenting on the importance of the youth in national development Rev. Sr. C. Ochiagha asserts that "a healthy nation calls for youths who are patriotic, hardworking, God fearing, honest,

peaceful as well as those who have respect for elders, law, order and discipline” (5). Every nation therefore must intensify efforts to inculcate sound morals and values in their youths in the development activities of the society due to negligence of duty on the part of the adults. Thus Calistus Ilozumba points out that ‘the society and our future shall be better or worse depending on how we now prepare our children to confront this contradiction’ (70). Unfortunately, the youths are often conceived as ‘social miscreants disposed to cheating, prostitution, drug peddling and addiction, political thuggery, robbery, examination malpractice’ (71). Although, this may not be totally contended, but as the popular Igbo adage says ‘as the mother goat chews cord, the offspring imitates closely’. The older groups of the society are not helpful in inculcating values and ideologies to the younger ones. If the youths must behave accordingly, they must be shown good examples. Pita Ejiofo maintains that ‘the good examples and leadership of the elders is essential in strengthening the formation of young people’ (89). He reiterated that ‘the problem of the youths is mostly a failure of the elders to lead by examples.’ (89). The elder is the principal formator of the young. According to Zeph, Uzor, ‘if adult avoid the social evils, where will the youths learn them’ (62). The main preoccupation of this short discourse is the examination of certain worrisome characteristics of the older generation and those of the younger generation that tend to conflict with each other as portrayed in the *Echoes of Madness* by Emeka Nwabueze.

Definition of Terms

The term youth has many facets depending on the circumstance of discussion. The United Nations defines it as any person whose age falls between 18 and 40 years. For Zeph Uzoh, it is ‘the early part of life specially the period between childhood and adult hood’ (21). The National Youth Policy of Nigeria Identifies the youth as ‘person between the ages of sixteen and thirty years.’ Cultural anthropologists perceive this age as the time when human patrimony is handed on while Psychologists on the other hand see this period as the age of character building and mental maturation. According to Ego C, a youth is ‘one who has gained a reasonable measure of independence both from himself and from the society at large’ (47).

Amako B.M.K opines that the term youth ‘has a connotation of young adults who are anxious, zealous, aggressive, enthusiastic and energetic’ (26).

From whatever angle one tends to follow in the definition of youth, this age group is generally seen as the age of inquisitiveness, independence and restiveness. They are the most vibrant population of any society. The elder on the other hand is the opposite of the youth. Oxford advanced learners dictionary defines elder as an ‘older person or an older member usually a leader of some community.’ This age group is generally perceived as the age of wisdom, caution and prudence. The elder is always looked upon for decision making and advice especially in a difficult situation.

The word conflict connotes struggle, collision or clash. Oxford advanced learners dictionary defines conflict as a clash or disagreement, often violent, between two opposing individuals. Different scholars have different views of conflict. Dougherty and Pfaltazgraft see conflict as ‘a condition in which identifiable group of human beings (whether tribal, ethnic, cultural, religions, social, economic, political or others) is engaged in conscious opposition to one or more other identifiable human groups’ (20). According to Oliver Onyekwere and Chiazaram Uche, ‘conflict could be constructive or positive, destructive or negative depending on how it is handled to explore solution to problem’ (244). Although conflict depicts struggle for something, Murray is of the opinion that social existence involves a great deal of conflict. Coser added that conflict is an essential element of social interaction. It is an inescapable part of human existence.

As Levin puts it, conflict is ‘any situation of disagreement between individuals, groups or categories of people that may be expressed in attitude and or behavior. This definition of conflict explicitly brings in inter-generation as possible source of conflict. When two generations are brought together, conflict is bound to arise mainly as a result of generational conflict can then be seen as ideological clashes, or differences in attitudes between people of different generations it can be linked with stereotyped discriminatory behavior and conflicting age norms.

Echoes of Madness: Brief Analysis

Set in a traditional fictitious Igbo community called Onuama, the play, *Echoes of Madness* by Emeka Nwabueze has its actions centered on the tradition of choosing a replacement for a dead chief priest of a powerful deity, *Avuja*. As the tradition of this community holds, at the death of Eze-Avuja, a ritual will be performed by the village diviner to pronounce a replacement for the dead chief priest. The failure to have a replacement within a specific number of days spells doom for the community.

Due to the importance and lucrative nature of Eze Avuja in the community, the result of this all important ritual is thwarted by some scrupulous elders of the community. The village diviner pronounced a replacement in the person of Obiora, an ambitious young man living in the United States of America. On his return to the community the young man declined the offer and the resultant effect is the tension, intrigue, manipulations and almost anarchy witnessed in the community.

Obiora's rejection of Eze-Avuja created a spiritual and political vacuum that must be filled. In their desperation to fill this vacuum, some elders of Onuama clan resorted to such negative attitudes as bribery, blackmail, intimidation, thuggery, among others. The end result is the complete destruction of the young man, Obiora both psychologically and otherwise. In his desperation, Obiora kills Akamanye, his uncle, who is the mastermind of the entire plot. Nwabueze's triumph in the play is the exposition of conflict between two generations in the pursuit of their separate ideologies and giving it a realistic depth that is reflected in the theatrical form of the play.

Inter-Generational Conflict in Echoes of Madness

In the play understudy, Emeka Nwabueze shows that the younger generation and the older generation hardly agree on many issues. The exploration of many conflicting issues between the youth and the elders is highlighted in many ways within the play.

Ideological differences constitute a source of clash between the two generations in the play. There seems to be little or co-ordination of ideas between the youth and the elders in the play. The youth's perception of age and death for instance conflicts sharply with those

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of the elders. When confronted with the question of their mission in
the shrine of Avuja. The following dialogue ensued between
Dimgba, the village youth leader and the elders.

Dimgba: the funeral of the old man of Onuama clan (2)

Odukwe: Did you say old?

This question by Odukwe would marvel any young man considering
the fact the dead Eze-Avuja was indeed an old man. However, the
two generations' ideas of what old age should be differ from one
another. Thus the dialogue continues.

Dimgba: you are old when you need other people's eyes to
find your wife

and wonder why called her (2).

Odukwe: Are you sure?

Dimgba: you are old when people begin to tell you that you
are looking good but no one says
are good looking.(3)

Nnaduaka: Listen my son, the only thing old age would
offer you is wisdom. That is
the meaning of old age (3).

In the above discussion, the youths' perception of old age is
something to be dreaded or feared while the elders see old ages as
wisdom and fearlessness. Ideological conflict most times leaves the
youths more confused and disorganized. While the youth understand
death as 'the demise of the body, the tearing apart of the soul and the
spirit, the separation of the body from its spiritual link, the rotting of
the temporal flesh'' (14). The elders see death as the call by the
ancestors to secure the future of this present generation. Osuofia's
outburst 'he is not dead''.(4) in the play leaves the younger ones that
came to bury the dead man more confused than ever.

The younger age is the age of revolution and impatience. This trait that is highly exhibited by the young generation conflict with the calmness and almost docile nature associated with the elders. This image is highlighted in the assembly of the people of Onuama clan. Although it is evident that no one is happy with Osuofia, the village diviner, it is only the youth that demanded his immediate execution. The elders were more cautious with their words thus:

Dimgba: Elders of our land my suggestion is simple.... Let us sacrifice
Osuofia to the shrine of Avuja and then request the gods to guide us
accordingly.....” (6)

Ogbuagu: It is with sense that a man kills the fly perching on his scrotal
sack... Let’s wait and hear from him.... A sane man does not provoke a dog to
anger(6)

Dimgba: We have waited enough, it is time to provoke the dog and demand
in an impatient and angry voice that it should either bark or if it has guts,
bite (6)

While the youths prefer action to words, the elders talk more and act less. The playwright seems to suggest that the cautious nature of the elders sometimes hinders the productivity of the youths. The play portrays the youths as one dimensional figures that lack self assertion and autonomy. They are seen as appendages incapable of undertaking meaningful action or decision. Dimgba, in the play is used to carry out all the nefarious activities of Akamonye and his cohorts. He is almost controlled like a puppet. He watches indifferently while the conspiracy of naming the Eze Avuja is being plotted by the elders. His only reaction was when Ojinnaka wanted to live the gathering and this reaction was prompted by Akamonye. In the allotting of post to the group by Akamonye, Dimgba was

given the post of an acolyte which simply means an attendant, assistant or follower. Obiora on the other hand is preoccupied with winning the love of his wife, Brenda. He does not discuss any issue without the permission of Brenda. Neither does he take any decision without her consent. When Ugodie come to inform him of the incest allegation being leveled against Chinwe and Akamonye, Obiora was ready to listen. Unfortunately, Brenda emerges and discouraged him against it. Thus a serious family problem is left unattended. Lack of self assertion constitutes a major problem between the elder and the youth in the play. It is also Obiora's lack of self assertion that made him refuse Akamonye's suggestion that Obiora should accept the priesthood position and pass the duty on to Akamonye. This would have saved Obiora some of his problems but because Brenda doesn't want to have anything to do with the priesthood, he refused and this cost him a great deal.

The importance of the youths in the play rests on their reserved stereo type roles. While Dimgba's loyalty is with Akamonye, Obiora is loyal only to his wife. There seems to be little or no psychological growth in them. In *Echoes of Madness*, one sees a play where communication is almost impossible between two groups. When the elders went to intimate Obiora of the inevitability of his initiation as Eze-Avuja, the two parties couldn't understand one another. While the elders maintain that it is *Avuja* that brought Obiora home, Obiora insists otherwise. Odukwe... we doubted the authenticity of the divination.... When the ritual was accordingly performed, you were directed home wards by Avuja...' (12)

Obiora: Who said I was directed home wards by Avuja?

Nzeduba: Our son, there's a shorter road to your father's house but you chose the one that passes through the shrine.... (12)

Obiora: That is the road I knew before I left for the united States. I was not directed to the shrine at all... 'What you guys are saying don't make no sense to me.... (12)

The dialogue continued without any of the parties understanding the others. Obiora is concerned with the thought of becoming the chief executive officer of a government parastatal while the elders are preoccupied with his initiation as the chief priest of *Avuja* shrine. After a long deliberation without any communication, Obiora concludes angrily “No basis for communication with you guys you don’t even want to consider my opinion” (13). Nzeduba adds “...we shall leave you to ask yourself some questions; to wonder aloud whether a man begets a son before his father” (13). It is evident from the above dialogue that communication constitute a major source of conflict in the play.

In another instance, Akamonye attempts convincing Obiora to accept the priesthood and pass it on to him. This discussion also hit a deaf wall. The two parties failed to understand one another and none was ready to listen to the others side of the bargain. Poor communication always gives room for frustration and anger. Thus Akamonye threatens Obiora “this is sheer madness. But we shall see. We shall see whose madness is greater! (21). Hypocrisy is also seen in the play as a major source of conflict between the old and the new generation. The elders that are supposed to be the saviours of the land are to be seen in the play as the source of its destruction. Their greed and desperation constitute a major source of conflict with the younger ones. The hypocritical nature of the elders is manifested in the Akamonye’s bribery of the village diviner, Osuofia and other influential elders of the community, to proclaim him the successor of the dead Eze-Avuja. This conspiracy however is foiled by what Akamonye called Osuofia’s semantic failure in the assembly of the elders. Hence he made a “wrong” pronouncement. Efforts were made by the group to remedy this but with the return of Obiora in the midst of the confusion, things became complicated. Akamonye and his cohorts appear to be tackling the communal problem but are only pursuing their selfish objectives. This is confirmed in the question asked by Okanume to Akamonye.

Okanume: You have been forcing Obiora to accept the priesthood (27)

Akamonye: Leave that to me. Only the birds on Iroko tree see the drummers

who play the music to which it dances, leave the matter to me (27- 28).

The elders' double standard nature is a major source of disagreement between the two generations in the play. In the play, the elders will either use the youth as a means to achieve their selfish objectives or frustrate all their efforts to be independent. Akamonye's ambition is to be the Eze-Avuja but when his plans failed, he tried amicably to convince Obiora to accept the priesthood and pass it on to him. When this also failed, he resorts to blackmail and thuggery. He frustrated every effort of the Young man Obiora. He made sure that even the appointment which Obiora claimed to have brought back to the country is terminated. He did not stop at this, he ensures that everything Obiora came home with from the United States is lost including his wife whom he killed with the help of Dimgba.

At the peak of their frustration, Brenda laments,.....

“.....We were ready to give our best to develop this dungeon of a place. But look at that. They have messed him up. They have messed up our lives” (36). This frustration is reflected in the subsequent actions of Obiora. He ends up quarrelling and slapping his wife which led to her leaving the house in anger and her ultimately demise.

Emeka Nwabueze uses his play to show that good examples and leadership is essential in strengthening the formation of young people. This he achieves with the juxta-positioning of the two generations struggling to express supremacy over one another's survival decisions. The playwright seems to be saying that only one thing can bring an end to the conflict between the young and the old. The old must give the young a chance. This is expressed with the death of Akamonye in the hands of Obiora.

Conclusion

The researcher's exploration of inter-generational conflict in Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of madness* reveals that many factors constitute sources of conflict between the elders and the youths in the society. Such factors are ideological differences, communication gap, hypocrisy, selfishness, greed and desperation constitute major sources of clash and disagreement between the elders and the youth. Being the most vibrant population of every society, the development of any society depends largely on the manner of its youth formation. Hence 'during this period, correct ideas and images are required for their good upbringings (Steve Akande, 139). As youth models, adults are expected to demonstrate the right values for the youths to emulate. The researcher, therefore, recommends that for the younger generations to have the chance to contribute their quota to the society, the older generation must give them the opportunity to do so. Their opinions must be given some consideration. The elders should endeavour to engage the youths in meaningful activities rather than use them as thugs or instruments for achieving their selfish goals.

The perpetuation of youth dependency and subjugation by the elder denies the youths their personhood and identity. This may result to deficiency in character formation. Their legitimate desires and aspiration should not be denied so as not arouse of feeling of disappointment in them. Just as seen in the play this may result to expression of anger and frustration that will be directed at those they hold responsible for their misfortune.

The young generation sees the older ones as models, sources of wisdom, guidance and inspiration. The perception should not be compromised by the elders in their activities and relationship with the youths.

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