

# Structures and strictures: a re-reading of Oladejo Okediji's "Rere Run"

*Oluwole Coker\**

**Abstract:** Literary and theoretical strictures are expounded in this discourse as central to the thematic concern of an indigenous playwright, Oladejo Okediji in his play, *Rere Run*. To this end, Marxist aesthetics as evidenced in the build-up of the economic conflicts are juxtaposed with characterization in evaluating the artistic vision of the playwright. The essay explores the universe of the play and draws out, subtly, the similitude in the literary preoccupation of a third-world literature and contemporary literary theorizing. There is a conscious attempt at redefining the poetics for literatures which are written in indigenous languages like Yoruba.

**Keywords:** literature, playwright, Nigeria, Yoruba.

This paper explicates how economic tussles between the two sides of the social divide form the kernel of thematic thrusts in Oladejo Okediji's *Rere Run*. It shall also be our concern to appreciate the play as a dramatisation of Marxist aesthetics in Yoruba indigenous drama which is instantiated by the bourgeoisie-proletariat dichotomy. The significance of characterization would also be appraised in the discourse and what this portrays in the dramaturgy.

Contemporary theories like Marxism feature prominently in indigenous literatures. It is also noted that though the writers may not necessarily have an intention of presenting the works as ones that mirror specific literary theoriz-

---

\* Department of English, University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos, Nigeria.

ing, rather unwittingly, however, the texts aptly fit into contemporary literary theoretical boundaries, this fact is chorused by Opefeyitimi (1997)

Igbagbo Karl Marx ati awon elegbe re ni pe ni awujo ti lyoo je alailabawon, ko gbodo si oro emi ju o, iwo ju mi nibe... Bi a ba si foye wo pupo ninu awon iwe ti awon eniyan wa ti ko, pupo le gbe ero Karl Marx jade bi awon onkowe ko tile ni ero re lokan. Bi apeere, *Rere Run*, Ti Alagbo Oladejo Okediji ko ko.

[Karl Marx and his colleagues believe that oppression is the bane of perfect societies and that it inhibits egalitarianism... if we examine many works of our people critically, Marxism would surely reflect, even if the writers did not have it in mind. For example, *Rere Run*, Oladejo Okediji's first work...]

We can effectively use the foregoing as a launching pad. It is obvious that economic related issues dominate the plot of *Rere Run*. Also, it is a matter of fact that economic and political energies are dissipated. Struggle and dissent are reflected in the agitations of the oppressed workforce of Onimogun, spear-headed by Lawuwo, the hero of the play.

The Onimogun-in-council represents the imperialist forces that rule with brute force, their followership. The breakdown of normalcy is thus a result of these demonic tendencies.

The hero of the play, Lawuwo, is an archetypal messiah of hope who is not driven by avarice, but rather by sincerity and a genuine desire for a permanent change from the hitherto stifling *status quo*. He is incorruptible and uncompromisingly resolute. He anticipates a triumph over the forces of oppression. More importantly, his portraiture is in such a way that his is prepared to sacrifice all the struggle needs.

Lawuwo not only motivates his followers, he equally strives to rejuvenate their psyche. This he does by constantly reminding them of his preparedness to lay down his life. Lawuwo lists out the consequences of class struggle with the oppressors and sounds a note of warning:

Lawuno:

E roo jinle o adie irana ki I se Eran ajegbe o... Nitori elomiran. A wewon, elomiran a ba ibe lo si orun alakeji. Akisa le n wo ti e n saroye Elomiran asis rinhoho danwo. Iya nko? Palaba iya a je elomiran.

[Lawuno:

Think deeply the funeral ritual hen is not a meat that without repercussion...  
Because some would be imprisoned, some would meet their deaths. You wear  
rags and complain bitterly, some would still be go naked what of suffering?  
Untold hardship would be meted out to some.]

These, as highlighted above is the price for the quest for liberty. The evolution of an egalitarian economic vision and struggle for bettering the lot of the down trodden of the earth – the oppressed masses which the workers represent, is dependent on these imperatives.

In other words, we find in Lawuwo, a true nationalist and zealous patriot who is devoid of materialistic intentions. Rather, he preoccupies himself with the task “equitable” distribution of wealth. Of course, through whatever means, including armed struggle. This shows that the crux of the imbroglio in *Rere Run* lies in the lopsided economic formulae seen between the town’s high chiefs and the workers. This reminds one of the agelong bourgeois-proletariat dichotomy that underlies Marxism as a political theoretical and economic philosophy. This is also mirrored in African literature, a point underscored by Ibitokun (1995: 56):

African literature prominently features characters who through their strength of will and, like Ogun, their progenitor, look for liberty in charge and dismantle the barrage of supremacist whiteness in its colonial, neo-colonial and apartheid structures. Through such socio-political angle is African literature known to be committed...

Thus, Lawuwo’s character portrayal exemplifies gallantry. This progresses appreciably till his efforts were sabotaged by Idowu who fell for filthy lucre of the oppressors, as represented by Onimogun chiefs:

Lawuwo:

*Atimole lemi ti n bo yi o, n o tii fojukan ilee mi n o tii de odede mi Boba tun ya bayi ti won de ti won mu mi mo setan ati pada lo* (OKEDIJI, p. 27).

[Lawuwo:

I am just back from detention. I haven’t been to my home. I have not set eyes on my family. But if they come again, and arrest me, I am prepared to go back.]

Having said the foregoing, it is not out of place to interrogate the conflicts which plague the nature of economic related matters in the play. The grave negative consequences of such yearnings, are found in the travails of Lawuwo whose wife was brutally poisoned by the machinery of oppression. The situation leaves him mentally derailed as he saw the fruitlessness of his efforts which was eventually thwarted through a combination of blackmail and intimidation and finally through betrayal. All these query the possibility economic liberation.

But the preceding paragraph cannot surely subsume the didactic and satiric intent of the dramaturgy. Oladejo Okediji no doubt lampoons the antics of messiahs of pain and opens a new channel towards the actualization of economic egalitarianism. Even if the will of the workers seems broken, the possibility of a new leader arising after Lawuwo's fall can not be foreclosed. Lawuwo's character typifies the classical Greek tragic heroes, in his manifestations of *hubris*, which eventually contributes to his downfall. For example, he pays lip service to Wuraola's pleadings and shuns the legal aid provided by his followers to fight his case before the court of law. Nevertheless, his is a situation of undiplomatic and uncompromising leadership:

Wuraola:

Lawuwo pelepele lafi n rin ninu idagbe ti a kii fi fara gbogbe. Agba to ni oun ko fee fesekan ere, toju tenu ni fi yi ere. Ma ka a si egbin pe awon omo egbe lo n dawo ti o o fi gba loya. Bo ba si jo egbin loju re, gbogbo igba ko la fii koya... ki nnkan o le dara. Ma faakekori, ma saseju (OKEDIJI, p. 32).

[Wuraola:

Lawuwo, it is with great care that one treads in the midst of thorns, if one is to go unscathed. An elder who does not want his legs to touch mud would have to use both eyes and mouth. Do not consider it insulting if workers contribute to obtain the service of a lawyer. And if you think this so, it is not all the time that one protests, so that things would progress. Do not be adamant, do not exceed your limit.]

In an ironic twist economic resources of their milieus are not challenged of fate, the reality of the situation dawns on Lawuwo – agents of imperialism would do all within their powers to consolidate their economic dominance in the affairs of the society. They would stop at nothing to ensure their stronghold on the. Lawuwo later laments:

Lawuwo: Eni to ba fori ti de opin afaimo ni ko nii d alaarú (OKEDIJI, p. 93).  
[Lawuwo: Whosoever endures to the end may likely become a labourer!]

This is the climax of suppression of genuine intention of social reformation which was spiritedly fought by the chiefs – agents of exploitation. Pity is elicited when the calamity of Lawuwo is considered. It should be underscored that the flame of protest suppressed may not last if the utterance of Mopelola is reckoned with:

Mopelola: E seun Kabiyesi, sugbon okan mi ko duro mo. Ki e to wi tele ni mo ti nfe maa lo, Mo fee loo so fun gbogbo aye iru olun ti n sele nibi isee wa ati iru ipo ti awon osise wa (OKEDIJI, p. 94).

[Mopelola: Thank you, your Highness, but my mind is against my staying. Before you said it, I had wanted to go and sensitize the whole world about happenings in our work place, and the status of workers.]

Then, another Lawuwo may soon arrest the seeming helpless situation. In other words, succour appears imminent. But situated within the observation of Ogunba (1995: 10), it is quite intriguing:

...African literature is full of these and many. Indeed, waiting for a messiah in modern African literature has been very much like waiting for Godot, or waiting for God, who may not come.

This makes the dreams of heroes like Lawuwo a mere mirage and his target of redistribution of wealth, a wild goose chase.

Lawuwo: Gbogbo won la o ko logbon igba yoo si wa dun fun mekunnu Eni sise wa loorun, eni maa je e wa Ni boojil.  
(OKEDIJI, p. 27)

[Lawuwo: We will deal ruthlessly with all of them and the lot of masses would then blossom. The worker is under the heat of the sun, the person who would eat is under the shade.]

Lawuwo evidently captures the scenario and for the purpose of this discourse, makes it abundantly clear that the essence of struggle in the play stems from economic realities. This cannot be divorced from the political machinations, controlled also by exploitative agents of capitalism. Ibitokun (1995: 164) laments the tragedy:

It is a great pity that some degenerate opportunistic rulers, as they run after wants on earth, oppress their subjects to the extent of making them consider their own basic needs as if they were their wants. That is the drama of humanity which compounds the drama of being.

In a final analysis, we can assert that Okediji in *Rere-Run* dramatises a universal angst of economic conflict which bedevils human societies, and which causes unrest and breeds anarchy. Economics thus reaffirms its centrality in human affairs and how germane it is an ensuring social order and tranquility. Lawuwo, as hero of the play thus makes characterisation as an effective literary device employed by the playwright.

This essay has attempted a critical reading of Oladejo Okediji's *Rere Run*. Characterisation is seen as an effective tool through which the playwright achieves his thematic objective. We have also been able to establish the fact that the conflict in the universe of the play is a direct consequence of economic tussles. It is therefore underscored that the dramaturgic world of Oladejo Okediji foregrounds the realities of a world built on oppositional structures.

**Resumo:** Críticas teórico-literárias são expostas neste ensaio como centrais para a preocupação temática de um dramaturgo indígena, Oladejo Okediji na sua obra *Rere Run*. Para este fim, estéticas Marxistas como as evidenciadas na formação dos conflitos econômicos, são justapostas como caracterização na avaliação da visão artística do dramaturgo. Este ensaio explora o universo do drama e tira, sutilmente, a similitude na preocupação literária de uma literatura de terceiro mundo e de uma teorização literária contemporânea. Há uma tentativa consciente em redefinir a poética para literaturas que são escritas em idiomas indígenas como ioruba.

**Palavras-chave:** literatura, drama, Nigéria, ioruba.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- IBITOKUN, B. M. *African drama and the Yoruba world view*. Ibadan: OUP, 1995.
- OGUNBA, O. Messianic yearnings on modern African literature. *Papers in English and Linguistics*, 1(1), 1995.
- OKEDIJI, O. *Rere Run*. Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1973.
- OPEFEYITIMI, A. *Tiori ati Isowoloede*. Osogbo: Tanimehinola Press. 1997.