

Potency of Satirical Art In Nigeria: An Assessment Of Satirical Art Forms

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Abstract

Satirical art forms are fast becoming a potent media of expression among artists and the general populace. This powerful and potent art form has been used to stir laughter and also point to a potent message in the observer. Cartoons, paintings and sculptures have been used as media of expression in art to pass messages across to people on various societal issues.

This paper is an attempt to explore the potential of satire in the various genres of plastic art to propagate messages. In Nigeria as other countries where the satirical genres of art have moved the people to action on state matters, founding fathers in the Nigerian art scene and other artists of repute have used satirical cartoons and other art forms to advance their positions on colonialism and other issues of national interest. Satirical art plays a great role in changing the psyche of the people toward various issues in the society and should be encouraged by all and sundry.

Key words: Satire, Art, potency, media.

Introduction

Political cartoons invoke not only truth, but a higher artistic truth, above the ethical parameters of the printed word. They have the ethical imperative to lift transitory journalism into transcending art.

Fischer, R.A

Art is multifaceted. It deals with various issues of expressions in social, cultural, economic, religious and political messages in the society. The genre of art used for a particular occasion might be different from another. This is because; art forms have various functions depending on the media of expression and the target audience. Satire is an art form, which has been in existence over a long period of time in contemporary art practice. One of the human emotions is laughter, and as the saying goes, 'Laughter is good medicine'. According to LeBoeuf (2007)

Satire is a powerful art form which has the ability to point out the deficiencies in certain human behaviors and the social issues which result from them in such a way that they become absurd, even hilarious, which is therefore entertaining and reaches a wide audience. Satire also has the ability to protect its creator from culpability for criticism, because it is implied rather than overtly stated; in this way, it becomes a powerful tool for dissenters in difficult or oppressive political and social periods.

This powerful and potent art form has been used to stir laughter and also point to a potent message in the observer. Satires can be in forms of cartoons, paintings, graffiti, sculptures and drawings, depending on the media of choice of the artist. This paper assesses the place of satire as an art form and the impact on the art scene in discussing current trends in the arts and the country.

Satirical Art Forms

The place of art works as objects of satire dates back to prehistoric man. The drawings, graffiti, paintings and other wall engravings carry magical powers believed by the proponents of the designs to help in their hunting skills. These art works as important as they are, look funny and laughable today in light of advancement in development, and the media used today for visual expressions. Satirical arts, like in literature, according to the Encarta dictionary are "using wit, especially irony, sarcasm, and ridicule, to criticize faults". The place of humour in passing strong messages by artists is an age long practice. The essence of such art is to correct faults

in the society and get the populace thinking in a relaxed atmosphere of laughter and sometimes sarcasm and ridicule in order to pillory the victims in discussion. Satirical cartoons also help in documenting issues in the society using wit, critiquing and reflecting social and political issues in order to check wrong trends. In light of global happenings and the tension in the nations. Cartoons tend to lighten the mood and engender discussion. On the other hand, the objects of the satire can turn violent and react vigorously and even resorting to physical assault. A case in point is the recent saga of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons which has political, social and religious connotations and led to a bloody attack on the cartoonists by some terrorists. This led to a world outrage against terrorism and a march by renowned world leaders in France to support freedom of speech and expressions. This was closely followed by torrents of cartoons in the prints and electronic media in support of Charlie Hebdo. Satirical art forms are poignant and can steer a lot of emotion (Laughter, anger, rage and crying). The Charlie Hebdo outfit has greatly influenced world outlook to the genre of satirical cartoons. In a recent article, Monde (n.d) states:

Charlie Hebdo employs their rather brutal satire against dogma, hypocrisy and hysteria, regardless of its source. Satire works by toying with different levels of interpretation (irony) - a fundamentally subjective endeavour which in the hands of Charlie Hebdo is sure to leave bitter after tastes. Humor is not a requirement.



Figure I. Translation: "BOKO HARAM'S SEX SLAVES ARE ANGRY. DON'T TOUCH OUR BENEFITS!"

The bitter aftertaste of satirical cartoon is the effect felt all around by fundamentalists and the interpretations given to a particular cartoon. The universality of satire is brought to the fore by the same Charlie Hebdo in the wake of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. In a cartoon, the links and concerns of other nations to the happening in Nigeria was advanced (Figure 1). The cartoon is about the Boko Haram group. The group is a militant and self-professed Islamist movement based in northeastern Nigeria, with additional activities in Chad, Niger and Cameroon, The design depicts Pregnant and veiled women, sex slaves of Boko Haram, complaining that their benefits are being removed. In explaining the context of the cartoon, the Monde (n.d) reports:

The cartoon combines the two news stories and shows the pregnant kidnapped girls voicing their support for child benefits. One of the ways the cartoon can be understood is as a satirical window into the psyche of a Front National (French far-right nationalistic party) voter, who conflates many issues (Islamist activities abroad, and benefits policies at home). One can picture a Front National voter watching a television broadcast about the Boko Haram kidnapping: he is already worrying about the benefit fraud these young women might commit when they are accepted as refugees in France!

This statement clearly shows that, the world is a global village. The happenings in one part have a boomerang effect on another area. The fear of the Boko Haram kidnapped girls coming to France as refugees and asylum seekers and claiming welfare is creating shivers in some of the populace. Their concern is not, however, on the rescue of the girls, or the attendant trauma of teenage pregnancy or other diseases associated with the kidnap of the girls and what they are currently facing, but rather, how their coming will affect the economy of their nation.

In a prose, Obuh (n.d) posits that:

Satire - "the art of laughter with knives" is certainly a social art, because the satirist mocks, attacks and ridicules actions of men and societal ills in order to sanitize society. This art form has been used by artists for a long time. Even in traditional societies, people often use proverbs and folktales, to ridicule and attack unwholesome attitudes of men and society as a whole.

The potency of artists in a society is hereby advanced. The long standing tradition of using wit to sanitize the society in order to create stability is horned.

Potency of Satirical Art in Nigeria

In Nigeria as other countries where the satirical genre of art has moved the people to action on state matters, founding fathers in the Nigerian art scene and other artists of repute have used satirical cartoons and other art forms to advance their positions on colonialism and other issues of national interest. A good example is the cartoon of Akinola Lasckan (1916 - 1972) and Gani Odutokun's (1946-1995) painting Segregation Even at 12.01. Fosu (1986) writes about Lasekan: "He produced provocative cartoons as weapons of political propaganda against colonialism and for promoting national consciousness". This artist has used cartoon and satire as a tool to awaken the consciousness of the Nigerian people. This he did successfully through the instrumentality of the print media, the West African Pilot. Fosu (1986) in discussing the work of Lasekan and the impact of the work, further states:

The Blackman shows a giant-sized African male girded in a wrapper from the waist down with the feet astride and chasing away diminutive Europeans in the beach scene. The Message was clear- time for the imperialists to pack from their colonial paradise to usher in the new political independence.

From the foregoing, Lasekan has set the stage for the political satirical cartoon in Nigeria. As a pioneer, he used the West African Pilot newspaper as his platform of expression. Other works by Lasckan include; The Nigerian Joker, Nigeria in Cartoons, Domination and Poor Africa to mention a few. In all these works, humour was the hub of the designs, created in caricature to carry pungent messages to the Europeans and other national leaders in error, in order to create a positive change in the society. These changes are evident in the consciousness created among the populace, and the need for proactive action in National issues. The pleasure of Nigerians buying dailies and other periodicals, and moving to the cartoon of the day is a case in point. This is to help relieve tension and stress, and at the same time, speaking salient messages to the people.

Gani Odutokun, another eclectic Nigerian artist and advocate for social change on the other hand created paintings, another art form, as social commentaries with some having satirical intentions. Jari (1999: 17), in critiquing Gani's Segregation Even at 12.01 (Figure 2) states that:

The painting is executed in varied tones of two hues, blues on the fringes, and browns at the center. Several stylized figures are depicted. The ones in browns appear more detailed and prominent with Caucasian features. They appear to be in some deep conversation, oblivious of the darker, less prominent figures peeping from the darkness. These other debasing figures appear to have nothing doing other than gape at the figures at the center.

In explaining the painting, Jari (1999) goes on to report:

At the time Gani was employed at the University, there were still a sizable number of European academics teaching alongside Africans. Seventeen years after independence, these Europeans still wielded a lot of influence. The problem was not their influence; it was their regard as a 'thrice - dipped tea bag'



Figure 2. Gani Odutokun, Segregation Even at 12.01, 1977, Oil on Canvas, 90 x 140 cm

A careful assessment of the painting reveals that the Caucasian figures were satirized. The long pointed noses, blank colours and funny looking expressions. This also speaks futuristically of the end of the tenure of European influence in the academic circle of Zaria, and the peeping black figures waiting expectantly to take the place of the Europeans.

In all these art pieces, the consistency of humour as a tool of propaganda was used by the artists. A protege of Gani whose works employ wits in sculptural forms is Tunde Babalola, Jari & Nwankwo (1999) states:

It is a common figure of speech among some ethnic groups in Nigeria that whenever an issue becomes grievous, it should be reconsidered as a joke. This is precisely what Tunde's works have sought to achieve. He sculpts burning subjects in bronze, but in caricature forms to provoke laughter rather than serious reflections. Yet, the viewer after the amusement ponders seriously about the message later.

Babalola's sculpture, *Romancing with Alcohol* (Figure 3) is a good example of this genre of satire using bronze sculpture, another art form. The ability to contemplate deep messages in an art form is part of the intent of the satire in art. It is important to interject here that, satirical art which is executed in caricature finishing, has all the trappings of master artists. The sharp resemblance where individual portraits are concerned, or the emphasis on certain body parts to draw attention is all part of the craft of satirical artists.



Figure 3. Tunde Babalola, Romancing with Alcohol, 1999, Bronze, 20cm

Several other artists like Adeboye Adegbenro (1959), Josy Ajiboye (1948), and Akin Onipede (1965) have worked as satirical cartoonists with newspapers like the Punch, Concord, Sunday Post, Morning Post, Daily Times and Vanguard. These newspapers have a wide readership and indeed the messages contained in the cartoons and other art forms used for expression reaches the target audience. Jimoh (2010) states:

An observation of the themes and styles of the cartoons analyses reveals that the cartoonists, Adeboye Gbenro, Akin Onipede and Josy Ajiboye are among the Nigerian cartoonist who use the genre of visual commentary to reflect, criticize and influence the opinion of the people in social political matters in the country.

Suffice it to say that, this all important art form has reached the recesses of the common man, and has served as a tool to speak unequivocally on national issues. The recent trend of viral messages on the internet has greatly helped in passing across satirical messages through art to the citizens on the street. This of course caution the rich and people in power to tread carefully, as the people are aware of their activities and the stage might be set for a revolution if drastic positive actions are not taken. The satirists usually stand in the place of making prophecies and also standing saliently as mediators in national issues.

Conclusion

The potency of satirical art in Nigeria was discussed in this paper. Cartoons and other arms of satire in art is a reflection of the socio-political realities in the Nigeria society and the world at large. The art forms of satire have been able to capture in vivid and lurid way the allegorical truths in our society through varied art media. In the words of Jirnoh (2010):

These cartoons play the role of informing the electorate of their right, the governments, the need to be transparent and not equivocal in the policy and also the importance of democratically elected government. They have brought out the shortcomings of the government to the public assessment in humorous ways.

Cartoons, paintings and sculptures executed using wit as a tool, plays a great role in changing the psyche of the people toward various issues in the society. It is the concern of the author to assess the impact of this genre of design which has received little patronage from some quarters, especially the receiving end of a finished satire art, and to encourage fresh, talented artists to come out in their number and keep the flaming spirits of the founding fathers alive in checking the societal menace through satirical art practice.

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