

## The Global Stage for Humanity and the African Disposition: A Case Study of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *Upstairs and Downstairs*.

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the socio-economic challenges faced by African nations as presented in the radio drama written by Ghanaian playwright, Efo Kodjo Mawugbe. The play, entitled *Upstairs and Downstairs*, uses lunatics to discuss the various challenges that face Africa's majority underprivileged. This paper looks at how characterization and the symbolic use of setting have been used to discuss issues of poverty and poverty alleviation by highlighting the all important duty of the African storyteller to tell the story.

**Keywords:** Socio-economic challenges, characterization, light house, symbol, lunatics, conference.

### Introduction

To some of us the Owner of the World has apportioned the gift to tell their fellows that the time to get up has finally come. To others He gives the eagerness to rise when they hear the call; to rise with racing blood and put on their garbs of war and go to the boundary of their town to engage the invading enemy boldly in battle. And then there are those others whose part is to wait and when the struggle is ended, to take over and recount its story. The sounding of the battle drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards – each is important in its own way. I tell you there is not one of them we could do without. But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle feather I will say boldly: the story... why? Because it is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior... It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. (Achebe, 1987, p.124)

And like Chinua Achebe expresses above, the storyteller in Africa takes the "eagle feather." This is because the African storyteller has a duty that involves the telling of the African story from a political, socio-economic, as well as religious view point. This is a duty that is greatly revered all over Africa and Ghana is no exception. Efo Kodjo Mawugbe, a Ghanaian playwright, uses his role as a storyteller to create a platform of discussion on the socio-economic challenges of Africa.

### *Upstairs and Downstairs*

*Upstairs and Downstairs* is a play discussing the socio-economic challenges of Africa. The play is written in what Mawugbe calls "four legs." This play is centered on three lunatics who escape an asylum with the intention of attending an on-going conference at a light house. When they reach the light house they are faced with a light house overseer who knows nothing about an on-going conference within his premises. The crust of the dramatic action occurs between the light house overseer and his lunatic visitors. They pretend to listen to the news and discuss issues on poverty alleviation. The play suddenly takes on an upsetting dramatic twist when Sonny attacks Maa and Paa and ends up killing Paa because he is hungry and there is nothing to eat.

The focus of this play is to paint a vivid picture of the African socio-economic disposition on the global front of commerce and economic policies by using simple language and drawing various social and economic scenarios in order to give the audience a clear picture of Africa's disposition. It is for this reason that the play, *Upstairs and Downstairs*, does not have a clearly constructed story, but a series of dialogues and scenes addressing various subjects that has to do with the African economy and poverty alleviation systems.

As such, the play, in its First Leg, begins with three lunatics on a beach. They are on their way to attend a conference at a light house. Their journey to the light house is fraught with many challenges because of their lunacy. For instance, Maa keeps rushing towards the sea in search of her baby which is actually a doll she has forgotten she is carrying at her back.

Then again, the Second Leg of the play opens with the light house overseer receiving a radio message about three missing lunatics that he must be on the lookout for:

**R/VOICE:** Update number two: Some prisoners of conscience, I mean lunatics, are reported to have escaped on a rickety raft from the psychiatric asylum on the Island. It is not likely they will survive the storm. Keep an eye on your beach and report to HQ when you spot dead bodies. You copy? (2<sup>nd</sup> leg)

After the above report from the headquarters, the dramatic plot progresses with the arrival of the three lunatics. They survive the storm and reach the light house safely. However, there is new chaos because Maa is screaming

for her baby's feeding bottle, and turning the whole place inside out to the dismay of the light house overseer who is confused and shocked over the intrusion. With all of the chaos, the playwright sets his stage to begin the serious business of discussing Africa's social and economic woes. However, the audience is confused over the arrival of the lunatics to the light house and their insistence that they are there to attend a conference. One begins to wonder what kind of conference, and perhaps even expect to witness an on-going conference where the lunatics arrive as unpleasant intruders. However, this perception is quickly expelled. The lunatics are not intruders, but they are speakers for a different kind of conference, and as speakers, their biography is narrated to the curious light house overseer when he asks about Maa and he is told that:

**SONNY:** Poor...woman.....Poor...heart-broken woman.....She....carried, like eggs, all her love in one basket, into the bosom of a man's bedroom. Gave him her all, and fed him her best. The best of her eggs.... Boiled eggs, fried eggs... scrambled eggs....Just to make her man happy in love.

**PAA:** ... When the IMF letter, offering him the scholarship to study abroad arrived, she was the first to read it.... The next day, she came from her Egypt and made her way straight, not to Canaan, but to the bank and there.....

**SONNY:** Withdrew every nickel and dime in her savings... Swept her accounts clean with a broom, and gave everything to ...

**PAA:** To support the academic ambitions of a prospective husband. (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

And the story continues with how the man disappointed Maa and left her heart broken and pregnant. The story explains why she clings to a wooden doll as though it is a real baby. The above narration by Paa and Sonny show us the human face behind Maa's present undignified and repulsive appearance. There is a social reason that caused her lunacy. This social reason is the disappointment of love. Paa's background is also narrated. We are made aware that he worked and lived a good life after many years of service to his country, until one day he receives a letter from his employers:

**SONNY:** **(Reads)** "It has become necessary as part of the on-going exercise to structurally adjust your present position within the new establishment. You are therefore summarily retrenched... and declared redundant... (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

These stories make us understand the sufferings of these three lunatics and by that understanding appreciate the reasons for their present states of lunacy. Their stories also reveal the human face behind their present predicament. This is because we get to see through their stories the different ways in which socio-economic policies and human attitudes have contributed to their present state of lunacy. For instance, Paa's story shows us a man who has been disillusioned by the employment system that has used him for many years and left him with nothing to show for his years of service.

In addition, their biographies navigate our focus to the characters of the play. The three lunatic characters whom we have already met: Maa, Paa and Sonny are the characters that advance the plot. Their names are a representation of humanity in general. In an interview with the playwright, Mawugbe, he explains:

Maa is used to refer to mothers in most parts of the world. It is the same for Paa and Sonny. A son is a son anywhere in the world. I used Maa, Paa and Sonny because they represent the world. They represent families all over the world. (August 10, 2008. National Theatre)

The characters are not mere lunatics but universal representations of the global society. This is because every human society in the world is made up of men, women and children. Moreover, the challenge of lunacy is also global. Every society anywhere in the world has its fair share of lunatics. By presenting these characters as lunatics who know too much when they should, in fact, be in the dark, as is typical of lunatics, we see a representation of the turbulent confusion of the African. The characters are recognizable and the audience identifies with them in the sense that their individual stories are stories that the audience can identify with in their own lives. These characters represent the ordinary people of Africa who have a story to tell.

It is for this reason that Maa, Paa and Sonny inform the audience that they are presenting papers at a conference. It is absurd that lunatics should be given the chance to present papers at a conference. The lunatics would be distracted during the conference and lose focus due to their mental instability. They exhibit this lunatic quality of inconsistency and chaos due to their lack of focus as the plot unfolds. For instance, in the first leg of the play when they are headed for the light house, Sonny complains that he is tired and Maa encourages him to keep moving because they would soon reach the light house. Then the same Maa suddenly becomes hysterical over her baby which is in fact, a doll.

Irrespective of Maa's lack of focus, she tells her story and the audience identifies with it and is drawn to it. The audience feels Maa's pain and is confronted with the shocking truth of Maa's past that has, in fact, driven her insane. The audience sees a mad woman on stage and is affected by this image. This ability to get the audience to be affected by this image hits on our consciousness as humans, and reminds us all that as humans we are motivated by the same impulse. The impulse to dream and to hope, the grace to live and the inevitable outcome of death, the impulse to inflict pain and to feel that pain—these represent the basis of our humanity as a people

and the playwright beckons on our humanity through his characters.

All three characters are not realistic in their presentation of the news. This is not entirely due to their state of lunacy. It is also due to the fact that they are at the light house to discuss the socio-economic situation of Africa from varying angles, and reading the news is one good way of achieving discussions on varying topics. After all, in the news presentation situation, the anchor presents different stories in a sequential order. The anchor's duty is not to give his or her viewers the final outcome of events, but to report on the present state of events. Therefore, Maa plays the role of the news reader and gets behind a box to read the news. Paa and Sonny keep interfering as Maa reads the news. Maa also plays along and sticks her head out of the box periodically to join in the conversation. This situation in itself is unrealistic. However, the playwright presents his characters in this dramatic action for a reason. As Maa reads the news she tells the story of Africa. In effect, we see the chaotic situation presented in the behavioral pattern of the lunatics dovetailing into a narrative of the African socio-economic situation as well as a global view of the socio-economic situation.

For instance, there is confusion in the world: Isaac floods hits Haiti which is still recovering from the earth quake of 2010. In some regions in Spain, doctors are responding to the call to save humanity by defying a ban on denying healthcare to illegal immigrants (news.yahoo.com, 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2012) In fact, so many things are happening at the same time, some good, and some bad. When it is bad, the less privileged feel the brunt heavier and when it is good, they do not partake of it. All of these events happen simultaneously, in a somewhat crazy manner as time passes by. And all of these events are a mirror reflection of humanity. So who else could present it better than these three lunatics who by virtue of their tag as lunatics are allowed in the social order of things to be chaotic?

The lunacy of the characters becomes an added advantage to the purpose of discussing the socio-economic challenges of Africa. Their nature to be easily distracted, get into frenzy and talk too much becomes the instrument by which the many issues affecting humanity on the African continent is discussed without the playwright worrying about the conventional plot structure for the presentation of plays. These lunatics discuss the many reasons and effects of poverty on the African continent and how this curse of poverty affects the human condition.

The human condition that the play seeks to address is extracted from one of the many themes that can be derived from the play—the gap between the poor and the rich must be bridged in order to successfully develop society. Throughout the play we see that its message is focused on telling the African story from an African perspective through “effective performance” by which light, set, and sound are synchronized with characterization and performance to bring out the playwright's purpose – by manipulating the “upside down” manner. This is in line with what John Russell Brown posits in his book, *What Is Theatre? An Introduction and Exploration* (1997). Brown explains:

The power of the theatre to be lifelike is easier to understand, even if it is commonly misunderstood. What happens on stage can look so very like what happens outside the theatre, in the ordinary lives of all of us ... (p.8)

This “understanding” is as a result of the performance. Whatever the artist has to say in a theatre is enacted. The audience can see tears, hear laughter, and even touch the actors. As a result of this, the audience has a better understanding of the playwright's purpose. This play exploits this all important ability of theatre to present the human nature in its weakness and originality. This weakness and originality is seen in the life experiences of the lunatics and how this has affected their general development. It is this experience that causes them to address the issue of poverty at the conference. After all, a poor man is no different from a mad man. In the sense that society treats him as an outcast and leave for him, like they would for a mad man, the crumbs from the table.

Therefore one can describe this play as a spring board for grass-root activism that is geared towards positive change in Africa. The play appeals to the contemporary African audience. For instance, majority of Africans are faced with poverty. According to the United Nations statistics on hunger, 26% of the world's hungry children live in Africa. Also, in sub-Saharan Africa the number of people in extreme poverty has increased. Two key reasons that were given as the cause of this problem are conflicts and harmful economic systems (www.worldhunger.org). By addressing this African crisis through his use of lunatics, the play further reinforces the precariousness of the average African's socio-economic disposition.

Perhaps the playwright believes that poverty can make a person go mad, and this is another reason why his characters are presented as lunatics. The playwright is not interested in just presenting the surface of the African socio-economic situation. He is determined to paint a vivid picture of the situation. After all, poverty cannot be polished in order to look pleasant. The playwright is worried about all the poverty alleviation strategies that African governments, in collaboration with foreign donors, map out to eradicate or alleviate poverty from among the people. These strategies, it has been observed, do not always yield the desired results. Therefore, the playwright expresses his opinion through Maa and Paa:

MAA: Eradicating poverty should mean more than the expansion of material wealth.

PAA: It should mean, enhancing people's sense of their own well-being ... using to the

maximum the best of whatever is available to them. (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

The solution to poverty eradication does not lie solely in the abundance of financial wealth. Financial wealth is only a part of the solution. Individuals should be motivated through positive social values as explained by Sonny: “generating hope, love and faith for the future!” (3<sup>rd</sup> leg) The message must touch their hearts and stir up positive change, and this is achieved through “effective performance” that adequately presents this theatrical concept in tackling issues that directly affect humanity.

The playwright does not mince words. As such strong words that stir up the emotions of the audience in discussing the subject matters of poverty and poverty alleviation are heard all through the play. It is for this reason that the characters employ the use of strong and uncompromising words in describing the African situation of poverty.

The message of the play also purports the belief that the eradication of poverty will only be effective if the appropriate authorities find new and better avenues that will ensure that the required aid reaches the right people. By the right people, this means the ordinary man and woman in the streets, hamlets and towns. As such, strong “words” are demonstrated through Maa when Sonny demands to know why the GDP growth never reflects on the lives of ordinary people in Africa:

MAA: It rather went into the pockets of a few rich people, from where it was siphoned into laundries Upstairs for dry-cleaning and safe keeping... Or could it have been used to meet the fat foreign rated salaries, and the operational costs of the fully air conditioned four wheeled drives CD vehicles, of the angels of the gods, who came to dwell, among men and to, as it were make the growth possible? (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

Maa’s blunt declaration explains Brown’s statement that “words are a vital and powerful element of the theatre.” (p.13) The “words” are spoken by the actors on stage who couple them with action in order to induce a reaction of some sort from the audience. For instance, the Ghanaian audience is reminded of the many red-plated CD licensed vehicles that ply the streets of the capital and have for their passengers big local and foreign diplomats who do not have to worry about the terrible vehicular traffic. These strong and bold “words” also remind the audience of the many news items where they see these diplomats come in with huge proposals that promise to save the masses but yet amount to nothing due to various reasons; some of which are: misappropriation of funds, lack of transparency, corruption, etc. These “words” also remind the audience of all the big four wheeled drives that ply the Northern, Upper West and Upper Eastern Regions of Ghana with the popular inscriptions that when first written were supposed to be the citadel for redemption: ADRA, CARE, JICA, DANIDA, USAID, ADD (Action for Disability and Development), Compassion International, among many others. At present these three regions continue to remain the poorest regions in Ghana. (ghanaweb.com) One avenue Mawugbe believes will help make aid reach the ordinary people and thereby bridge the gap between the rich and poor is by making the voices of the poor heard in these conferences that are supposedly held on their behalf to discuss their plight. At times, those who have never felt poverty make the decisions on how to eradicate poverty for those who live with it, and therefore, they are incapable of fully appreciating the situation as it is. This is why the lunatics have a problem with the credentials of the resource persons who will speak at the conference:

SONNY: Which of those Resource Persons ever stood toe-to-toe neck-to-neck with poverty? ... Or ever got degraded or humiliated by poverty?

MAA: Tell me this, which of them has ever drunk from guinea-worm and bilharzias-infested stagnant pool that serves as our village’s main source of drinking water?

MAA: Or ever worn a school uniform sewn out of food aid flour sack, combined with jute bag, with the inscription ‘IN GOD WE TRUST, NOT FOR SALE’ boldly appearing on the back of the shirt?

SONNY: Or walked ten kilometers at dawn to the farm, to carry a ton of cocoa on the head ...

PAA: Trot to a buying centre located ... another fifteen kilometers from the farm

MAA: Before running to a school located another fifteen kilometers from home...

SONNY: To sit as part of seventy noisy children in an apology of a classroom, that has for a ceiling the branches of a tree ...

SONNY: If any of your folks up there has experienced half of what we have just described, then he or she can address the conference. (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

The above challenge thrown by the lunatics reinforces the argument that one really needs to experience poverty in order to appreciate what the poor go through on daily basis. In fact, this play serves the purpose of confronting the audience with a theatrical vision of poverty through the above description by the lunatics, (as well as their unpleasant physical presence) and thereby appeals to their humanity to seek positive change and to effect that change.

Africa needs to, as much as possible, bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, because the continuous polarization of these two groups that make up Africa threatens to lead Africa into chaos. The playwright believes that the poor might one day wake up and attack the rich. This is symbolized by Sonny’s attack on Maa and Paa,

because he is hungry and they are unable to provide him with food. Sonny is thrown into frenzy and screams for food.

Sonny's act confronts the audience with the adverse effect of poverty which can breed violence. The act of murder by Sonny is gory. However, unpleasant as it is, it remains the true consequence of poverty in a world filled with so much frustration. It also remains an important part of our humanity and this is what interests the playwright. He explains:

I am looking at the unjust global system of the world. The IMF response to the needs of under developed countries. The World Bank Programs. I am looking into debt relief by the 'powers that be.' And I'm looking at all these issues semantically. (National Theatre. August 10, 2008)

The above response by Mawugbe explains why he creates the mock conference through his characters. The world needs to have new insights into handling the poverty situation in Third World countries. Mawugbe believes a lot can be done to change the lives of poor people the world over. All stake holders need to meet on a common ground, and there is no better place to achieve this than in the light house, which is a place of enlightenment.

It is for this reason that the play is set in a light house. During our interview I asked Mawugbe why he chose a light house as his setting in *Upstairs and Downstairs*:

I chose the light house because the light house is a Place of enlightenment. Light creates discovery and fresh knowledge. We all need light houses to find our bearing in the turbulent waters of life. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

A light house provides light to ships at sea, directing their navigation through rocky areas and bringing them safely to shore. Every ship at night needs a light house to reach home safely. On the global stage for humanity, the African is lost. For instance, the G-8 had no African representative when it began holding its meetings in 2008. At present there is the G-20. ([www.about.com](http://www.about.com)) South Africa is a member of the G-20 and she is the only African nation in that group of economic powers who make decisions that do not only affect their economically powerful states, but the entire globe of which the tomato farmers of Northern Ghana, who have almost non-existent motor-able roads and no scientific knowledge of food preservation are also members. These scholarly, politically and economically motivated decisions affect their lives and yet they have no place on the global stage for humanity.

Irrespective of this major challenge, it is imperative that Africa properly positions herself on the world's global stage. Africa needs to be heard, and not just heard by self-imposed statisticians who pretend to go out there and fish out the problem; and also claim that they have all the answers to the problem. It is obvious that they do not if children in Somalia are still dying of hunger – but Africa needs to be heard through the man who stares at the problem “face-to-face, neck-to-neck” (if I may borrow Mawugbe's words) every day. This ordinary African lives with the problem, he knows the problem better. He understands better the root cause of the problem and perhaps might even have some useful strategies to help curb the problem.

Every light house has light and light helps one to see even in the dark. When a person has light, he or she is sure not to stumble or fall in the dark. Light can also throw insight into issues of life that were hitherto hazy or unknown to a particular group. The play beckons on the audience's sense of imagination to see, with the help of the light provided by the light house, the suffering of the ordinary man in Africa, and to help find practical solutions to save him from poverty. Sonny encourages the light house overseer: “allow some of the light you project into the ocean to affect your imagination.” (2<sup>nd</sup> leg)

Maa, Paa and Sonny use the symbol of the light from the light house, aided by their strong sense of imagination, to paint a picture of the conference. The characters throw more light onto the socio-economic situation in Africa through the issues they discuss in the play: hunger, poverty, conflicts, bad leaderships, poor economic decisions and poor representation. These issues and many more are a true reflection of Africa's disposition on the global stage for humanity.

The playwright's aim for using the light house is to create a platform of knowledge and ideas. The playwright believes that by so doing, he can create awareness of the desperate situations of third world countries in areas such as education, health, food production, infrastructure, potable drinking water, among many others. The ideas have to do with the new ways and means to help salvage the situation before the time bomb of chaos explodes, and the poor majorities attack the rich minorities. It is believed that enough light has not been thrown into the issue. *Upstairs and Downstairs* uses the symbol of the light house to throw more light onto the aforementioned problems.

I asked Mawugbe why the title: *Upstairs and Downstairs*:

The title became so after I had met Ola Rotimi. The man affected me and I began to see it more or less as a political satire. In fact, I am portraying two worlds. Those upstairs are the powers that be, they think they know it all, so they have abrogated to themselves the power to think and act on the behalf of us: you and me who live downstairs when they do not fully understand our needs. The worse part of it is that we are in the majority. (National Theatre,

August 10, 2008)

There is the need for Africa to represent itself well on the global stage for humanity. We must find a better advocacy and dissemination system that will ensure that all the aid meant for the poor reaches the poor. We need to ensure that when we meet to brainstorm on the many challenges that faces our continent, the meeting would not be about us, the few upstairs who just want to show our credentials, but it would be about all of us so that the issues that directly affect those downstairs would be well understood so as to be better dealt with.

Efo Kdojo Mawugbe's aim as a storyteller is to tell the African story, and as Chinua Achebe puts it in his novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) he must take the "eagle feather." Mawugbe has done his part by telling the story. In the telling of his story, he opens our eyes to see our disposition as Africans on the global stage for humanity. By so doing, he fulfills the duty of the African storyteller: to give delightful instruction, and as the Senegalese griot D'Jimo Kouyate puts it in his essay, *The Role of the Griot* (1989): "... the griot's main intention is not to entertain but to teach the people to know themselves."

*Upstairs and Downstairs* requires us to know ourselves and to improve upon the African situation. The African storyteller has a duty to fulfill. Art cannot be merely for art's sake in the contest of the African writer or storyteller. Art serves as a tool to meet the needs of the African people. And in *Upstairs and Downstairs* Mawugbe meets that need by fulfilling his duty as a storyteller, and it is left for us as his audience to rise up to the challenge and press on to repositioning Africa in a more advantageous light on the global stage for all of humanity.

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