

Jean Pliya's *La Secrétaire Particulière* as an archetype of Satire

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Abstract

This form of creative art called literature is a principal tool for socio-political and economic struggles among other things. It paints life with a view to share human experiences, feelings, imaginations, observations, findings, predictions and suggestions for practical realities. In this paper, we attempt to elucidate Jean Pliya's *La Secrétaire Particulière* as an archetype of satire. The purpose is to facilitate the comprehension of African Literature of French expression. Our review is premised on pragmatic approach, which holds that literature and other forms of creative arts have certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral or behaviour re-orientation. The paper concludes that satire is an essential mechanism in the hands of many African writers to achieve their motives.

Keywords: Literature, creative arts, satire, fiction, non-fiction, society, development.

1. Introduction

By creative art, we mean any man-made successful effort in creation whether visible or invisible; tangible or intangible for the purpose of human development. The practice of making fun of a human action with a decision to correcting the character excessiveness or weakness is known as satire. "Satire is pleasurable mechanism evolved by the society through which it copes with deviation from accepted codes of behavior" (Adeoti, 1994). Hence, satire is an attack on folly or vice demonstrated by an individual, a group of people or a given society with the intention to correct such dirty or unacceptable behaviour. From listeners, viewers and, or readers, satire is used to achieve a reaction of contempt.

Fictional entities are "principally those entities originating in and defined by myths, legends, fairy tales, novels, dramas and other works of fiction," (Peter Lamarque, 2000). He holds that philosophical interest in fictional entities thus covers a surprisingly wide range of the subject such as ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of language and aesthetics.

"A selection of events on the basis of chronological sequence, casually and the value of judgments has always been necessary; that is to say information about reality has been presented to and by the human species in the forms of narrative fiction known to us as History, and the statements of politicians and journalists", (Joan Rockwell, 1974). From Rockwell argument, it can be deduced that everything is fiction on one hand and on the other hand, fiction is reality.

"Works of literary non-fiction may be defined as those that aspire to be factual and true. These two values, however, are not the same thing. Works of fiction are not factual, but they can be true in that they represent a state of affairs that we recognize as potentially, perhaps profoundly, true. On the other hand, work of fact can distort the truth... By itself, a list of facts may be accurate, but such a list lacks the kind of truth that may be found in works of history, or biography or documentary. When a work reflects an aspiration to be both factual and true, it satisfies a necessary condition for literary non-fiction." (John Warnock 1989).

As a matter of fact, it is strongly difficult to separate fiction from non-fiction because the two are essentially co-extensive. They have interlocking relationships which cannot be automatically deconstructed. The elements of fiction can be found in non-fiction. Hence, no work of narration; drama, poetry or prose is totally fictional/imaginative or non-fictional/true. "No absolute truths or eternal facts", (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1986).

Anchored on the ideologies of the formalism and/or structuralisms, literature is words or the writer's expressions and that art is for the purpose of itself. "... A literary work is relatively closed. It creates a world which insists on being taken on its own terms and when those terms are violated by inappropriate questions, the result is a palpable sense of absurdity," (Douglas Jefferson and Graham Martin, 1982). This view presents text as self-sufficient and independent. Meaning is seen as "a continual shifting back and forth between the language of the work and a network of contexts which are not in the work but are essential for its realization," (Robert, Scholes, 1976). Scholes sees meaning as something which is present in dialectical interaction between the text and its informing context.

"... literature itself has its own purpose and determinants... never wholly autonomous it draws its prime motives from deep within the common culture, the life experience of its producers in their time... but it never speaks for the

totality of that culture,” (Warner Berthoff, 1981). Hence, literature or any work of art generally is not closed, independent or self-sufficient on its own. There is a connection between literature and the milieu/environment where it is produced.

“The writer has no means of escape, we want him to embrace his time closely, and it is his lot: it is made for him and he is made for it,” (Sartre, 1948). Society means an association of people, which comprises people that have rules of behavior such as beliefs, customs, traditions, conventions, social values and norms by which the society can change and protect the trade unions of a given society. Society is “a particular community of people who share the same customs, laws, etc” while development stands for “the gradual growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger, etc”, (Hornby, 2000).

All of the concepts discussed above interplay in the creation of many literary works, so they are seen as essential indices in the presentation of our subject-matter, Jean Pliya’s *La Secrétaire Particulière* as a satire. “The general resemblance to reality is what makes art recognizable to the rest of us. But what makes art artful is the fact that the artist imposes his own matter upon these forms in a way that gives them another responsiveness to another inevitability, a new necessity and probability,” (Murray Krieger, 1976).

2. Analysis

Jean Pliya, a native of Djougou in the Republic of Bénin wrote the *La Secrétaire Particulière* (Confidential Secretary) in 1973. The play, *La Secrétaire Particulière* x-rays objectively the description of African societies characterized by many follies and vices which prevent them from developing. As a contemporary social critic, Jean Pliya became the spokesman for his people especially the masses in the Republic of Bénin.

La Secrétaire Particulière, which is translated as the “Confidential Secretary” sets in the Republic of Bénin shortly after the colonial period. This play of four Acts reflects the realities of the period it represents. As an active participant of the colonial invasion, Jean Pliya is privileged to juxtapose the colonial period and the post-colonial time favourably. The post-colonial era in African States is a time of dashed and shattered hopes and aspirations of the majority. Hopes and high expectations are displaced and replaced with social injustice, misplacement of priorities and misery. The playwright demonstrates that pains imposed on the masses by the agents of post-colonial administration are not in any measure less than what the said masses confronted during the colonial era.

The piece of satire borders on the dirty practices by some so called public holders that can be found in any human society. “La nouvelle bourgeoisie bureaucratique urbaine”. Favouritism, nepotism, epitome of power abuse, seduction of the less privileged, bribery and corruption are some of the evil games paraded in Jean Pliya’s *La Secrétaire Particulière*. The writer also brings into focus, the resultant effects of such practices on the poor innocent citizens which include unemployment, poverty and frustrations.

To press home his point, the playwright uses Monsieur Chadas as an archetype of corrupt public office holder. Being the head of his Department, Monsieur Chadas has Nathalie as a confidential secretary. Within a short time, Monsieur Chadas and Nathalie become secret lovers and engage in illicit love affairs. Because of the relationship between them, M. Chadas often protects her at work, even when it is obvious that Nathalie is grossly incompetent for the job she gets paid for. Nathalie becomes unsettled and jealous when Virginie, another more qualified secretary is sent to the department. Nathalie sees Virginie as a big threat to the protection she enjoys from M. Chadas and of course, her happiness, so she seeks the possible way of discrediting the new secretary.

In his characteristic manner, M. Chadas makes advances to Virginie and when the lady refuses, he accuses her of insubordination and incompetent for the job; but Nathalie who compromised her integrity is absorbed as the perfect secretary. From among several visitors to his office, M. Chadas gives preferential treatment to only women.

M. Chadas deceives Nathalie that he would help her in the qualifying professional test design to disengage the unqualified secretaries from the service. While Virginie and other worked hard to prepare for the test, Nathalie went out with M. Chadas in the evenings because the latter promised to help her pass. When the result of the test came, Virginie and Jacques, the clerical officer to M. Chadas passed but Nathalie failed woefully and this means losing her employment.

Through corrupt means, M. Chadas gets his promotion. When he tells Nathalie, the young girl rebukes him instead of rejoicing with him. Nathalie uses that moment to announce that she is carrying a baby in her womb for M. Chadas. In his effort to reject the pregnancy, M. Chadas threatens her and when trying to push the lady out, he hits her and she falls. Nathalie’s mother, with Denise, her cousin arrives at the scene and Nathalie is revived at the end. She recounts her story to people and after a long battle of denying and issuing of threats, M. Chadas accepts being responsible for

the pregnancy. He however, begs that the case should be off record to avoid scandal. The minister himself arrives and orders the immediate arrest of M. Chadas having heard the story.

As a social satire, Jean Pliya decorates his play, *La Secrétaire Particulière* with the indices of bribery and corruption, nepotism and favouritism, social injustice, misery and poverty.

In an ironical manner, the playwright makes bribery and corruption a central issue to the story. M. Chadas collects bribes from his subordinates. He accepted some turkey and drinks from Jacques and a bottle of wine from Virginie. His protest against corruption is a mere pretense. M. Chadas is also morally corrupt because he knows he does not qualify for the position he occupies. His intelligent quotient is very inadequate. He has a faulty conception of the word boss, who according to him is always right. The discussion with his secretary as regards the correct spelling of "agrandir" is a typical example. This lack of knowledge makes M. Chadas not to see anything wrong in all that he does.

Most of our so-called public office holders today are mentally weak and should not have been allowed to hold any office because you cannot give what you do not have. The fever of corruption has caught even the least workers in the public civil services such as messengers. In the play, *La Secrétaire Particulière*, we see a common messenger asking for bribe before he can allow the peasant farmer in, to see his boss, M. Chadas. He bluntly tells the farmer: "Pas de cadeau, pas de planton" (P. 45).

Corruption has eaten to the bone marrow of our societies even to the extent that the respected learned fellows are equally engulfed in the dirty game. M. Chadas and his lawyer bribe Avocé Holonon, the victim of the motor accident to lie in the Court and M. Chadas wins the case against him (P. 59).

This event pictures what most of our privileged people do when they are involved in a case with the poor. The rich believe they can always have their way by bribing their prey. All these things call for attention.

Another shift in the account of evil practices in African States in Jean Pliya's *La Secrétaire Particulière* is social injustice. From the appointment of workers to certain posts, the society itself is unfair. The treatment given to the farmers and women, in *La Secrétaire Particulière* shows that there is imbalance in the polity. The farmer laments: "Ah! Qui me dirai qu' avec le départ des Blancs le temps de la justice est venu? (P. 46). [Oh! Who says with the departure of the whites the time of Justice has come?]. The case of the retired soldier, "ancient combattant" in the play, *La Secrétaire Particulière* brings to mind the unfairness and the wickedness in the society that after gallantly serving his nation all his life, he finds himself rejected by the same society he served and protected. The ex-soldier goes out every day looking for a job and comes home empty-handed. (pp43 - 48). Apart from media reports, as students of human societies, we observe that most retired men and women not just from the defense ministry, but across ministries die of hunger in most African countries as their entitlements and pensions are not paid.

"It is evident today, the rural communities have been cut off from the urban areas because their roads have become impassable. Most, if not all our communities, are smarting from their rustic eerie darkness. The people of our hinterland are hungry for development, and desirous of the opening up of their villages to beat back the forays of want, deprivation, poverty, primitivism, superstition. Generally, they long for better living conditions and the benefits of science and technology," (Okey, D. Ebele, 1998).

There is a large scale misery in the land. People just want to improve their lot by gaining access to money to feed their family and attend to other needs. In the play under review, Jean Pliya's *La Secrétaire Particulière*, Jacques whose educational progress is retarded by financial difficulties; the former soldier who has nothing to feed his family (p.47); Avocé, the accident victim that accepts bribe (p.60) and the young girl who is ready to do anything to get a job (p.49) are all poverty symbolized. It can be deduced therefore that our playwright denounces poverty as it allows frustration to set in. when there is frustration, people compromise and the attendant consequences are moral debasement and anti-social tendencies, which do no good to the society.

Nepotism and favouritism are two concepts which always find their ways into discussion of any writer of a satirical writing. In *La Secrétaire Particulière*, the author reveals these elements of his literary composition through the relationship between some of his characters. For instance, the recruitment of the messenger is an eye opener that there is favouritism in the scheme of affairs in the society. The messenger gets the job as a result of his relationship with the Minister (p.12).

The relationship between M. Chadas and the Minister also reveals the presence of nepotism and favouritism. M. Chadas boasts to Virginie that even though he has no university degree, he plays his cards well, so he is highly placed (p. 16). He gets his promotions regularly because of the special rapport he has with the minister (p.60). It is evident that the relationship between M. Chadas and the minister gives him the audacity to engage in the many cases of abuse of power.

Nathalie benefits from favouritism in her job since she befriends her boss, M. Chadas. She is not qualified for the job but keeps the employment until the weeding test comes up.

To pass the professional qualifying examination, Jacques relies strongly on his uncle who is an adviser in the Ministry of Health. Like an average African, Jacques believes: “Quand on a un parent sur le pommier, on est sûr de ne pas manger des pommes vertes” (p.58). That is to say; when one has a relative on the apple tree, one can be sure of eating ripe apples. Underscoring the wrong conception of what life should be. We caught M. Chadas say “J’ai le bras long...” (I have long leg/I am connected with people that matter).

The character traits of M. Chadas provide clear evidence of an errant individual designed to exemplify a practical social satire. M. Chadas who rolls out rules and regulations, which would make a worker a perfect civil servant is a defaulter as regards the said rules and regulations. Punctuality, zeal, professional consciousness, transparency, generosity, loyalty to one’s superiors and show of gratitude for services rendered by the superiors are the guiding principles for who would be a successful career man or woman according to M. Chadas. But surprisingly, M. Chadas is fond of coming late to work. As if that is not enough, he uses the official telephone to engage in a chat with his friends: Nestor (p.15) and Barnabé (p.20) having warned Virginie not to use the telephone for unofficial matters. Surely, M.Chadas does not lead by good example. This is really the true picture of those opportunists we have as public office holders. They pay lip services to the electorate that elected them into the office. They gamble with tax payers’ money. In short, hypocrisy is the order of the day. The level of indiscipline on the part of most senior civil servants is revealed. They break the laws they make without any pain in the neck.

M. Chadas can go to any length to protect his personality, ego and position. When Denise, the lawyer wants to interrogate Nathalie, the female passenger in the car as at the time of the accident, M. Chadas declines. This shows that M. Chadas has a skeleton in his cupboard. He is not trustworthy and loyal to the system, where he finds himself. The illicit love affair between M. Chadas and Nathalie, his confidential secretary further exposes him as a morally corrupt civil servant who does not practice what he preaches. M. Chadas uses his office to victimize his female staff by making advances to them. He exploits those who serve under him by collecting bribe right in his office. Jacques, the messenger in M. Chadas’ office explains to Virginie and of course, to us as readers how he gave two turkeys and some bottles of wine to M. Chadas before he got his employment.

The fast promotions of irresponsible and incompetent M. Chadas as it were, indicate that the system is porous and corrupt. People’s advancement in the public service can be ascertained with the support of highly placed officers. In sum, M. Chadas is a man of doubtful integrity. He is not transparent and conscientious. He is infidel; with three wives and fifteen children, he still lusts after women. He is a man of contradiction. He represents the privileged class in the society who rape the polity at will. They take charge of high positions because they are connected with people that are highly placed in the same system.

The playwright employs satire to denounce the African society that is bedeviled by avoidable follies and vices. He criticizes the mad search for office work. Again, through his satiric mechanism, Jean Pliya exposes the political class that is performing below expectation, even worse than the sacked colonial lords. He x-rays this ugly trend through the behavior of M.Chadas and the minister who abuse ethical codes with high impunity. It can be deduced that Jean Pliya’s criticism on tyranny is a response to an unsatisfactory systemic order which is determined by the writer’s experience, participation or observation. He constantly draws attentions to the perceived inadequacies of his country, the Republic of Bénin and the African society in general.

3. Conclusion

Through creative art, the systemic reality can be mediated upon, even when such reality is guided and/or controlled by irrational forces. Satire as a mode of intellectualization, without doubt, has the potential to x-ray the modern world in all its ramifications. It is an essential mechanism in the hands of many African writers to achieve their motives and is therefore a constant pattern of discourse and a veritable channel by which the form and content of Jean Pliya’s *La Secrétaire Particulière* can be accessed and reviewed. It is obvious that satire offers some indices of defense mechanism against shocks to which our playwright, Jean Pliya often confronts as an informed participant in his society. In other words, satire is an anxiety reduction technique which enables us to laugh at the expense of those errant personalities and institutions with a world-view to correct those unwanted practices which militate against societal advancement in whatever form. The writer’s political concerns manifest in his play,

La Secrétaire Particulière. Bribery and corruption, nepotism and favouritism, social unfairness misery and poverty call for attention to keep the society in the right track of development. Poverty especially paves the way for

frustration, which dislodges integrity and moral uprightness. Human society therefore needs the services of literature to perform certain functions.

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