

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SATIRE AS A DRAMATIC TOOL FOR SOCIETAL REFORMATION: EFUA SUTHERLAND'S *THE MARRIAGE OF ANANSEWA*, EXAMINED

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### ABSTRACT

The use of satire as an artistic weapon is an age long phenomenon. The ancient Greeks employed it in deriding unwholesome moral and institutional tendencies in their societies. Writers like Vigil, Horace, Juvenal and others also employed it in the old Roman Empire as a medium of attack on their Emperor's excesses. People in the traditional African societies also use folklores, songs, proverbs and verbal arts to comment and ridicule human failings and to attack prevalent social vices. Thus, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of satire as a tool for reforming the society. Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* will be the focus of the study. The researcher explores a textual analysis of the play to reflect the effectiveness of satire as a tool for reforming the society through its plot, theme and characterization. There are cross references to other creative writers who have used satire to attack societal ills with the purpose of sanitizing them. An attempt is also made to trace the history and types of satire in the work. The chosen text is of great socio-cultural relevance, as it carefully records one of African societal problems concerning marriage.

**Keywords:** Africa, Playwright, Reformation, Satire, Society.

### INTRODUCTION

The overpowering socio-political problems confronting the African continent can rarely go unacknowledged by African writers. Ogunba (1985:21) expresses this concern thus:

*When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of a Chronicler and Postmortem Surgeon. The artist has always functioned in the African society as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time*

The above explains the fact that playwrights are part of their societies and so, have a better explanation of what is happening around them as they operate as the conscience of the society. They have committed themselves towards restoring order to their communities which have been engulfed in a myriad of socio-political and economic disorder. This burning patriotic ideal of the playwrights, according to Awodiya (1995:33) is;

*...to use the weapon we have; our pen, our zeal and eloquence to awaken in our people the song of liberation with our writings. We wash away the stigma of inferiority, rouse our dormant energies, unmask the pest and traitors among us, and preach the positive sermons.*

From the days of the Greek Philosopher, Socrates, writers have been in the vanguard of social change, challenging the mores of oppressive society. The artist's mode of assessing the socio-political system in a society is satire; a form of writing which makes fun of the evil or foolish

behaviour of people, institutions and the society in general. The literary artist is known to have used satire from the beginning of literary history. The Greek and the Romans extensively employed it as a weapon of attack on their respective societies as far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. The Poet, Aeschylus for example, is said to be the first Greek literary artist during this period. Among the ancient Romans, there were such names as Horace, Juvenal, etc. whose satiric works and ideas have continued to shapen and influence the minds of contemporary satirists.

Apart from the Greeks and Romans, we also have great writers in the middle ages who used their writings to criticize the actions of men and their shortcomings in their respective societies. Such names as Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Dickens, Brecht, George Eliot and Sterne readily come to mind. When we consider artists who have used their creative works to expose the ills in their societies in the contemporary time, especially in Africa playwrights like Soyinka, Osofisan, Sutherland, J. P Clark, Ola Rotimi etc. have made use of satire as an artistic mode of expressing the social and political realities in the contemporary Africa. The African society for them is obviously a chaotic one, where dreams and aspirations of the people remain unrealized. They have seen with shock the endemic corruption, moral decadence and political exploitation that have become part and parcel of the society.

## DEFINITION OF SATIRE

There is no generally accepted and all-embracing definition of satire. Each writer and critic sees and defines it the way that suits his interest. However, it is generally accepted that satire is a justifiable means of correcting human vices and follies, that blends criticism with humour in order to bring attention to the faults, problems and shortcomings of the society.

Bamidele (2001:41) defines satire as;

*...a dramatic form in which human vices and follies, abuses or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule with intent to bringing about improvement.*

Abram (1981:162) however defines the term as:

*...the literary art of diminishing a subject by evoking ridicule towards it; an attitude of amusement, contempt and indignation of scorn. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself while satire derides, that is, it uses laughter as a weapon and against a butt existing outside the work itself.*

Vaughan (1986:208) defines satire as “a mode of writing that utilizes wit and humour to criticize or ridicule human institutions and behaviours with the view of correction and improvement”. On his part, Moody (1988:76) sees satire as “any form of writing which is deliberately and humorously critical in intention”, while Barnett *et. al.* (1976:266), contend that “satire is a work ridiculing aspects of human behaviour and seeking to arouse in the audience contempt for its object”. In the same vein, Bloom (1979:49) says that satire is a work which ridicules or hold up to scorn the vices, crimes and absurdities of men and individuals, of class and organizations of societies and civilizations. The above definitions of satire are by no means exhaustive since different writers continue to define it the way it suits their purpose.

However, the definitions suggest in clear terms that satire focuses on criticizing human follies and institutional vices through the use of laughter, not destructive in nature, but for its subjects to critically evaluate his/her faults and imperfections in order to instigate changes through such revelations.

## HISTORY OF SATIRE

Historically, the word 'satire' has its root in Latin. It was initially called 'satira', later, it became 'satura', meaning 'medley' or 'mature'. According to literary history, satirical usages were part and parcel of folk culture in many ancient communities in which literary arts flourished, especially in Greek culture where it was said that satirical usages were located in Grecian fertility rites (Brockett and Ball, 2007).

Literary history also has it that it was in Greece that satire recorded its first victims in 7<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. The satirist was Aeschylus and his targets were his defaulting bride-to-be and his prospective father-in-law. Aristophanes was known as the best Greek satirist whose play *The Cloud*. satirized Socrates as the incarnation of atheism and sophistry while *The Wasp* satirizes the Athenian Court. Geoffrey Chaucer, the 14<sup>th</sup> Century English Poet was a Master Satirist as well as the 16<sup>th</sup>C French author Rabelais in *Gargantua and Partagruel*. The early part of the 17<sup>th</sup>C witnessed great satirical works like Cervantes' *Don Quisote* in Spain, Ben Jonson's comedies in England and Moliere's Comedies in France.

The neo-classical period was great for satires. Satire dominated the writings produced then and there was a return to formal verse satire. It was at this time that Samuel Butler attacked the Puritans in the mock epic, *Hudibras* and John Dryden also wrote the famous *Absalom and Achitophel*. The 18<sup>th</sup>C period also produced great satirists like Alexandra Pope, Jonathan Swift, John Kay and Robert Harley.

Jonathan Swift was one of the greatest and one of the first writers to practice modern Juvenalian satire. His work, *A modest Proposal*, suggests that the Irish Peasants should be encouraged to sell their children to the rich as a solution to the problem of poverty. Swift's purpose is to attack and criticize the indifference to the plight of the desperate poor. In *Gulliver's Travel* and *A Tale of Tub*, Swift attacked the flaws in human society in general and England society in particular. He satirized the political, economic, social and religious aspects of human society. Satire also flourished in France. La Fontaine's *Fables* and Voltaire's *Candidate* are examples.

The 19<sup>th</sup>C was not particularly noted for satires. However, in England, a lot of satiric verses were produced by Lord Byron among which was his unfinished *Don Juan*. Satire in the 20<sup>th</sup>C was not too different from the previous trend. It is only the context of the exposition and the treatment of contemporary realities in human life that show some variation. George Bernard Shaw produced satiric drama in England, while in France, satire appeared in the fiction of Anatole.

Satire in Africa drama has been in existence for a long period of time. It has been established in the cultural and linguistic premise of African people. Most of the African proverbs, myths, riddles and songs clearly depict that satire is by no means a new tool in African drama. Satirical drama is a means through which African playwrights criticize and ridicule the follies and vices in the society. Ola Rotimi's *Who is a Patriot?* is a satirical comedy which criticizes the ineffectiveness and negligence exhibited by various individuals in authority. He attacks and criticizes the unpatriotic and irresponsiveness of politicians, businessmen, military and various individuals to the needs of the masses.

Tewfik El Hakim's *Fate of A Cockroach* satirizes what exists in most African homes, where the wife takes over the mantle of leadership from the husband as a result of the husband's

weakness or inability to control his wife. This situation is seen as abnormal in African homes and it is compared to what obtains in the 'cockroaches' world. Zulu Sofola's *The Wedlock of the gods* criticizes most African parents who use their daughters to amass wealth at the expense of the children's happiness.

From the above, it is quite obvious that satire is a prominent tool in African drama. It has been used by various African playwrights to reflect, expose and unveil the anomalies in their societies.

## TYPES OF SATIRE

There are three types of satire. These are; the Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean satires respectively. The Horatian satire was named after the Roman satirist Horace. It seeks to criticize rather than attack vices and follies. The Horatian satirical tone is less harsh, gentle, smiling and sympathetic. It makes use of mild mockery and playful wit. According to the Cambridge Companion to Roman Satire (2005:182) Horace says:

*Although I portray examples of folly, I am not a prosecutor and I don't like to give pain. If I laugh at the nonsense I see about me, I am not motivated by malice. If I make you to laugh at yourself, remember that my business as a classical writer of comedy is to chasten morals with ridicule, and if I sometimes make you feel like a fool, remember that I have by the same action cured your folly.*

Seldom (1978:16), in support of Horatian satire says:

*Horace's satires are full of self-revelation, self-scrutiny and self-irony. He does not present himself as a remote and self-righteous preacher but rather as a familiar and fallible individual.*

A good example of Horatian satire is Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*. The Juvenalian satire was named after the Roman satirist, Juvenal. It is harsher and bitterly contemptuous of corruption than the Horatian satire. It seeks to attack and addresses the follies and vices in the society through the use of scorn and ridicule. A good example of the Juvenalian satire is Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*.

The Menippean satire was named after the cynic Menippus. It is the oldest, chaotic, complex and formless type of satire. It tends to criticize its subject-matter and the structure of the world. It views human vices and follies as a social disease. Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Gone Mad again*, is a good example.

## SATIRE AS A REFORMATION TOOL

Satire, the art of laughter with knives is certainly a potent weapon for societal change as it mocks, attacks, criticizes, ridicules and exposes the follies and anomalies existing in human societies in order to sanitize them. It is a fashionable tool used by playwrights, critics and various individuals in reforming societies which are engulfed in political, social, religious and moral decadence. This artform has been used by creative writers for a long time, even in traditional societies, people often used proverbs and folktales to ridicule and attack unwholesome attitudes of man and society as a whole.

Olaniyan (1988:48) in an attempt to show the importance and effectiveness of satire as a tool for reforming the society argues:

*Satire focuses its lens on our feelings as a community of people and magnifies one or several of our sores for critical inspection, using a surgical tool, such sharp weapon as scorn, derision, ridicule, laughter and bitter irony.*

Bamidele (2001:8) also opines that:

*A man's shortcoming when paraded in dramatic work is most clearly laughable, if he pretends to have excellence while in fact, he has only the corresponding defect, then he is laughable according to his own admitted standard.*

These two statements clearly show what satire is out to achieve; to criticize societal ills in a way that elicit laughter. It is a potent tool in the hands of creative writers to reform and sanitize societies.

At this point, we need to examine some creative works in prose, poetry and drama in which the writers have employed satire as a potent weapon used to ridicule and attack ideas and people's way of life and societies. Our foray will span through literary works both in European and African literatures. In European literature for example, Aristophanes' *The Birds*, Moliere's *The Miser* (a play), Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (play), Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tale* (a collection of narrative poems), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travel* (a novel), are all creative works which are satiric in tone and intention. In African literature, Ayikwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* (prose), Mongo Betis' *The Poor Christ of Bembe* (prose) Ferdinand Oyono's *The House Boy* (prose) Soyinka's *Trials of Brother Jero* and *The Lion and the Jewel* (both plays), Efua Sutherland's *Marriage of Anansewa* (play) and Ola Rotimi's *Holdings Talks* (play) are all satiric in one form or the other.

When we talk of satire, it is clear that each age produces its own corrective satire but generally, the angriest satire is that which is directed against individuals and groups whose conduct shows a marked departure from the norms of the society. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* is a successful work of satire in the Horatian tradition, through its deliberate portrayal of farcial, naïve, idiotic and sometimes erratic personalities, in making us laugh not only at those ridiculous personalities, but also at their actions, deeds, ideas as well as the societies which they personify. Sutherland could be regarded as a liberal reformist as far as the philosophy of social change is concerned. A reformer does not call for a revolution to effect changes in the society, instead, he may agitate for a gradual overhauling of the existing socio-political, religious and economic systems, if there are obvious cases of contradiction.

The above philosophy characterizes her play *The Marriage of Anansewa*. The playwright does not at any point call for a radical change in the society, rather, she locates and anchors the problems in the society to man's gullibility and materialism, Sutherland is certainly uneasy about the endemic problem of corruption stimulated by materialism, immorality, and societal gullibility, which have become an integral part of our corporate existence. As a writer of imaginative works, she has used satire as an effective tool with which she seeks to restore normalcy into her society that is apparently disintegrating everyday.

### **SATIRE IN SUTHERLAND'S THE MARRIAGE OF ANANSEWA**

*The Marriage of Anansewa* is a story-telling play drawn from a Ghanaian folklore that centres on the exploit of Ananse, the trickster. In the play, Sutherland satirizes in an amusing way, parents who use their daughters as means of amassing wealth. She makes use of

Ananse's character to artistically present to the people the way they actually are. Ananse's character is mainly created to show some human passions, over-ambition, materialism and other anomalies which exist in the contemporary African society.

Ananse represents the average poverty-stricken African who has the aspiration of getting rich quickly without laboring for the riches. He makes use of his beautiful daughter, Anansewa as a tool in getting four chiefs to marry her. He lures Anansewa into the plans which he has creatively designed by mentioning her utmost need, which is the payment of her school fees at the EP Secretariat school as well as the last installment of the type-writer which he bought for her:

Ananse:

*I put it to you that the principal of EP's Secretarial school-the Miser that he is-will remain merciless; that he will not hear of your returning unless I pay; unless you are carrying the money in your hands. Right or wrong?*

Anansewa: (getting more unhappy) Right.

Ananse: *A haa, now let's turn our attention to that object there, that type-writer. After you have gone out and returned home here, will the last installment on that type-writer which you need for your training be paid? Eh?*

Anansewa: *No.*

Ananse: *Good. So you agree there is a need? (p.11).*

In his desperation of getting rich, he makes use of his daughter's beautiful photograph to lure the four chiefs into the web which he has successfully woven for them. His intention of using the ill-gotten wealth is mainly for materialism. He wants to wear expensive clothes, donate huge sum of money in the church, change his straw-stuffed-lumpy mattress to a soft-bouncy-Dunlop and after death, to be put in a coffin drawn in a fine private hearse with attendants, eating salad and drinking good whisky.

Ananse becomes a tool used by Sutherland to satirize various individuals' desire for luxuries and materialism, an attitude that is prevalent in the African society. She also criticizes those individuals who aspire to get wealth due to their ridiculous belief that "one is not respected unless one has wealth" (p.12). This is the erroneous notion in most African societies which has driven many people towards the inordinate ambition of using any means to get money. Some even go as far as killing their parents, children or sacrificing their manhood, all in a bid to get rich. Thus, Sutherland presents Ananse with her artistic ingenuity and craftsmanship for the society to criticize itself.

In this play, Sutherland also satirizes parents who make pre-arranged marriage for their daughter either to sustain friendship with another family or purely for business partnership. Such parents are less concerned about the happiness of their daughters and less mindful of what becomes of the fate of such daughters. Such an attitude is quite common in African societies. Sutherland kicks against this practice and encourages the daughters in question to kick against such bad acts. This is noticeable in the way Anansewa bluntly rejects the money-making arrangement of her father:

Anansewa:

*And you really mean you are trying to tell me that all those four chiefs of yours are satisfied with just photographs?*

Ananse:

*Oh, the photographs have slain them, have slain them flat. Your engagement is not far off at all.*

Anansewa:

*I will not take part in any photograph engagement (p.20)*

Anansewa's blunt rejection of that forced marriage is also captured in her sonorous song:

Anansewa:

*How exasperating! Oh, my father is selling me, he is selling me (she clamps her neck and sings, the players join her).*

*My father is selling me.*

*Alas, alas!*

*Whoever thought he would?*

*Alas, alas!*

*But let me tell you bluntly,*

*I'll never comply*

*I will not let you sell me.*

*Like some parcel to a customer*

*Not ever!*

*Not ever*

*Not ever*

*Not ever (p. 19)*

This nefarious act of 'selling' one's daughter into marriage is also prevalent among some tribes in Nigeria where the birth of a female child automatically spells fortune for the family. Immediately after a female child is born,, the child would be betrothed to her would-be husband who would start paying bride-price both in cash and kind to the parents of the girl and when she's of age, he will pick his 'wife' with or without her consent. The situation is even worse if the girl in question is highly educated. The higher the level of her education, the higher the bride-price. This exorbitant bride-price usually puts many prospective suitors on the run, thus disallowing such girls from getting married in due time.

The stupid system of marrying through photograph is also satirized in this play. Ananse 'sells' the picture of his daughter to the four chiefs to lure them into marrying her. The gullible chiefs do not even deem it fit to insist on seeing the girl face to face. This practice is very common among our youths nowadays. They simply 'fall in love' with pictures on the face- book and propose marriage to such individuals right there on the internet. Many have had to marry miscreants with beautiful faces on the internet without prior knowledge. Such an action stems out of sheer gullibility. These are the issues which Sutherland is preaching against in this play.

However, despite Anansewa's protest and blunt refusal to succumb to her father's photograph- marriage- arrangement, she later ends up dancing to his tune due to the helpless state she finds herself. Sutherland presents Anansewa's helplessness to showcase the helpless state in which those daughters find themselves in the face of their parents' whims and caprices. In most cases, their failure to submit or compromise to their parents' demand may result to hatred and ill-treatment from the parents. They are either disowned or treated with cold-shoulder, apathy and derision. Some callous parents may even place irrevocable curses on such daughters.

Finally, the playwright uses satire which is spiced with humour and laughter to expose the atrocities and vaulting ambitions of African parents who force their daughters into unwanted

or pre-arranged marriage in order to amass wealth for themselves or sustain their friendship with another family. This play becomes a means for us to critically evaluate and re-examine ourselves and make necessary corrections/ adjustments to free the society from such cruel acts.

### CHARACTERIZATION IN THE MARRIAGE ...IN RELATIONS TO SATIRE

Abram (1981:21) defines characters as:

*Persons presented in a dramatic or narrative work who are interpreted by the readers as being endowed with moral and dispositional qualities that are expressed in what they say-the dialogue and by what they do-the action.*

Sutherland *The Marriage of Anansewa* makes use of different characters to satirize and portray various individuals in the society. The characters include:

#### ANANSE

Ananse is the comic hero of the play. He is intelligent, shrewd and crafty. He is used by the playwright as a mirror to reflect on the anomalies in the human society. He is not only being presented as a mirror for reflection but he, s also used to criticize and ridicule various individuals who exhibit such behaviours in the society. Ananse is able to eradicate his state of poverty through cunning means. He is hypocritical, pretentious and condemns wealth, yet craves to enjoy the materialism and luxuries of life which is the reason his daughter, Anansewa asks him:

Anansewa:

*(hesitating) so, father, do you desire all those things? Haven't you condemned many of them, often and often? You have pooh-poohed them, haven't you? (p. 13).*

Ananse is clever and resourceful but cunning. His knowledge of the customs and traditions of the land enables him to succeed in his plans. He manipulates the established custom to his own advantage, knowing fully well that the financial gifts he receives on behalf of Anansewa do not constitute the head drink. So he continues exploiting those gullible chiefs to bring more. The playwright attests to this fact through the following words of the story-teller;

*It is very clear that he knows the custom more than well. Notice how he has them at his fingertips, spinning them about, weaving them into a design to suit his purpose. It would be amazing if there was any among those four chiefs who didn't know that a man who desires to marry somebody, s daughter can improve his chances by paying his way with gifts. Ananse has selected men who will do exactly as he hopes and do it properly too (p. 25).*

Due to Ananse's cleverness, he is able to escape the impending doom by faking Anansewa's death to keep away the three other chiefs, and getting Anansewa successfully married to the right chief.



## ANANSEWA

Anansewa is a beautiful young girl who is a student of EP Secretariat school. She is intelligent which is apparent from the speed with which she types the letters for her father at the opening scene. She is inquisitive and contented with what her parents can afford for her unlike her father who is materialistic. She is very obedient to her father as manifested by her acceptance to stay back and type his letters despite that she is about going out. She bluntly rejects her father's photograph- marriage -arrangement but later gets along with him when he convinces her of his plans.

Anansewa is proud, noble and tries to maintain her self-dignity and integrity. Despite that she desires to get married, she bluntly refuses to be sold like a parcel to the highest bidder:

Anansewa:

*I will not let you sell me like some parcel to a customer (she sings on),  
I will select my lover myself;  
I will never comply....  
Not ever  
Not ever.... (p. 20).*

## DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

Efua Sutherland employs rhetorics in this play. According to Bamidele (2001), "rhetorics is a functional dramatic technique that is used to satirize or expose a character. It can also be employed to arouse laughter in the audience or to create a mythical trait in the character". Rhetorics is also referred to as 'technical jargon' or chant, aimed at stimulating audience' interest in the character in order to effect comic arousal. This is seen in the way Ananse describes the four chiefs in his letter to them. The letter to chief-who-is-chief will be used as an example here:

*Oh! Fire-extinguisher! Fire-extinguisher, you have caused flame flashes to darken, you have caused the irreversible to come to a full stop. Blazing column-of-fire-who-says-I-will-not be halted, has come to a full-stop. Masculine-one-Destined-To-Command-To-Victory, you consume fire, a braw.*

These lines are intended to incite laughter from the audience and may not be viewed from its pejorative perspective only but to a large extent as a study of rhetorical speech. As earlier said, this play stems from Anasegoro, a Ghanaian story-telling art by Akan-speaking people of Ghana. Though, it is not usually a domestic activity, lately it has been given full theatrical expression with established conventions (Adeseke, 2008). It is from this system of traditional theatre that *The Marriage of Anansewa*, with its beautiful songs, which are rhythmically recited on the basis of solo and choral response, is based.

## CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of satire as a tool by playwrights and creative writers in general in reforming the society has been critically examined in this work. Sutherland in *The Marriage of Anansewa* satirizes individuals and parents who use their daughters and wards to amass wealth or sustain friendship through the character of Ananse. The playwright has carefully recorded the societal problems, vices and anomalies prevalent in the contemporary African

society. She has fulfilled her duty of being not only the mirror but also the conscience of the society by exposing and criticizing these anomalies which have become an integral part of our corporate existence.

Thus, the play is a successful work of satire in the Horatian tradition, through the deliberate portrayal of farcial, naïve, greedy and cunning personalities, in making us to laugh not only at these ridiculous personalities, but also at their actions, deeds, ideas as well as the society which they personify. Laughter is not only a feature of the Horatian satire, but also a means to an end. In this regard, Sutherland could be said to have succeeded in exposing the idiocy, greed, corruption, materialism and gullibility of the people in order to ridicule them. The work could be seen as an artistic success with the simplicity of the overall style. The playwright is able to convey her message to the reader with ease, by telling the truth in a jest. Sutherland has told us the unavoidable bitter truth about ourselves and about our socio-economic and cultural problems. The truth satirized in this play is not applicable to Ghana alone but to the whole of African society in general.

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