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Violative Representamina in Frank Ogodo Ogbeche's *Harvest of Corruption*

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Abstract

*Nigerian literature has, over the years, reflected different aspects of the law. Existing studies on the law in Nigerian literary scholarship have focused on morality, crime and punishment, with little attention given to socio-political failings, and representamina (words and actions) which are agents contributing to violations of the law. Hence, this study examines the literary representations of contravention of law in Frank Ogodo Ogbeche's *Harvest of Corruption*. This study applies aspects of the Postmodernist and Peircean Semiotic theories to account for characters' defiant words and actions which breach the law. In the text, most of the characters subvert, and defamiliarise actions governed by law through their words and actions and often suffer quandary and paranoia in expressing fears of the unknown. With their naive followership, these common characters become victims of the depraved oligarchy. Elitist characters whose duty it is to ordinarily make laws, interpret them and enforce them are presented as agents of the contravention of the law. They break the law with impunity and lure innocent characters like Aloho to follow in their deviant footsteps. Through his use of satire, the playwright foregrounds this misdemeanour, advocates obedience to the law and cautions against iconoclastic attitudes which are capable of compromising the rule of law.*

Keywords: Literary Representation, Contravention, Obedience, Lawlessness, Violative Representamina

Background to the Study

Nigerian written literature has, in the past few decades, intertwined with law and its methods. Nigerian writers engage the law in interrogating historical archetypes, behavioural dispositions, psychological idiosyncrasies and cultural values which have become antipathetic and defiant to accepted moral values. Since her political creation in

1914, the Nigerian nation has struggled with series of socio-political, ethnic, cultural and religious challenges, arguably, as a result of her diversity. Notable among these difficulties are her constitution drafting crises, fight for independence, militarisation of government, civil war, neo-colonial disillusionment, bloody coup d'état, financial embezzlement, corruption, rape, battery and assault, prevalence of stereotypes, cultism, brain drain, nepotism, terrorism, tribalism and the like. All of these and many others have collectively become the Nigerian experience. The literariness of Nigerian literature therefore cannot be divorced from its tie to these motifs which are reflections and refractions of attitudes towards the law in the Nigerian society.

In the words of Ayo Kehinde (2008:334) "it is assumed that literary texts are a valuable locus for studying the interplay of arts and politics; literary works offer an interrogative epic of Nigeria's political history over the past 46 years." It is in this sense and critical poise that Nigerian literature acquires its Nigerianness; that definiteness that defines what can be called Nigerian literary art. Kehinde (2008) further argues that "Nigerian writers have always found the informing vision of their creativity bound by the socio-political experiences of the nation, which their works both reflect and refract"(334). Hence Nigerian literature which is a sub-set of the African literature can be said to be a utilitarian literature. Its social significance is seen in its reflective and refractive nature while its literary elegance and character are conspicuous in its use of satire and parody. Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu (2009) corroborate this view:

Such gory experiences as the slave-trade, the colonial domination, the disappointing post-independence leadership, the carnage of the civil war, military dictatorship and general socio-political anomie, can be said to provide a rough and chequered definition of the Nigerian socio historical experience which has naturally given birth to a national literature of same complexion (57).

Nigerian writers have been generous and patriotic, albeit reactionary, in addressing some of these issues. Their aim has been to enlighten the average Nigerian and perhaps expose him/her to pivotal perspectives to Nigerian problems which have continued to wax as a result of the infraction of law. Perhaps, one of Nigeria's and indeed Africa's great misfortunes is the general belief that its people had no culture before the coming of the

colonialists – a situation Emenyonu (1991:iv) describes as “part of the general misconceptions created by colonialism about Africa.” Many Africans accepted this Eurocentric narrative about themselves thereby giving room for disillusionment which trickles negatively as an attitude towards the law. This double-self which Clyman (2017:1) calls “fractured consciousness” and also resonated by Turner (1997:108) as “split personality” creates in the Nigerian or African fondness for contravention, a hybrid self that lacks value for local contents.

Of Law and Corruption: The Legal Justice

The title of Frank Ogodo Ogbeche’s play, *Harvest of Corruption*, is not just a violative representamen but also a direct consequence of the infraction of law. Laws are objectively made to curb corruption but when corruption becomes the order of the day in any society, then the law can be said to be infringed upon. *Harvest of Corruption* is one of the plays written by Frank Ogodo Ogbeche, a Nigeria-based playwright. The play tells the story of Aloho, a young Nigerian female graduate, who is not only desperately looking for a job but is also ready to sacrifice her long nurtured moral and legal values for same.

Ogbeche’s *Harvest of Corruption* succinctly and systematically examines the consequences of the violation of law. He identifies corruption, desperation, despair, stubbornness and nonchalance as some of the direct consequences of postmodernist experiences. The playwright paints a picture of the natural law in Aloho’s knowledge of God and her friend, Ogeyi, who is a foil to her. Aloho laments the seeming inability of the law to save her from her ordeal of joblessness despite her faithfulness to its principles “You? Work here? What on earth is happening to me? (She looks upward, hands skyward.) God in heaven what have I done wrong? Why is it that those who try to serve you never get it easy?” (3) Her rhetorical questions – representamina – in apostrophic voice suggest her depression and resignation – interpretants – to the desires of her Eros. She muses about the seeming good life her former schoolmate, Ochuole, now enjoys despite her predilection for pranks in their school days:

Imagine how we despised you and your group for living reckless lives. First we thought you won’t even make your papers but you came out in a two two class and

here, again, you are comfortably working while I am still searching for one. (She addresses God above.) Look at me, where do I belong now? What have I done wrong? Have I not served you faithfully? (Tears dropping from her eyes). (3)

As earlier argued, the Almighty God is the progenitor of the natural law and indeed all other forms of law. Hence, Aloho acknowledges the supremacy of God as the basis of all law. She is very much aware of that exalted portraiture of the natural law and the need for a total allegiance by all human subjects. However, the unfortunate socio-economic circumstances around her – her apparent postmodernist disillusionment – continue to question the authority of the natural law in her consciousness. She wonders why a social and moral dissident like Ochuole who is not academically brilliant in their days in school will be so fortunate and comfortable at the expense of good girls like her. This fact challenges her moral will and resolve.

Having endured the psychological trauma of obeying the natural law and not getting much positive results for too long, Aloho makes a u-turn. She is psychologically ready to violate the law. For her, it is the way of the world, if you cannot beat them, you join them. There is always something about the law which confronts us positively or negatively; our perception of its principles and the social influences we have around us. As a moral foil to her friend, Aloho, Ogeyi continues to play her emphatic roles. She scolds and admonishes Aloho for fantasising about her meeting with Ochuole:

And she what? (Clasps her palms together) say again, have you forgotten her life style? And why should you get yourself mixed up with Ochuole of all people, why? That girl, who has soiled the reputations of all decent girls in this Jabu. Is that the girl you ran into? I won't have you associating with her. (8)

It is ironical that Aloho now chooses to be like the bad Ochuole that she once despised because of her behaviour. Ogeyi uses a satirical representamen in calling her friend to order. To emphasise the seriousness of her point, Ogeyi makes a sarcastic and hyperbolic assertion: "that girl, who has soiled the reputation of all decent girls in this Jabu." To her advice and show of concern, Aloho simply doles out her plans and newly acquired socio-

economic characteristics to her friend. She sounds heartbroken and reborn. For her, of what use is an unalloyed obedience when life hits you so badly, and you know full well that your supreme factor has the power to shield you but has refused to do so. In her newly found resolve, there is no going back “Ogeyi!...I believe she was changed. Anyway ...she asked me to come to her ministry tomorrow morning. She assured me that her Oga will employ me. Ogeyi, I am going. Right now, I want to get a job.” (9) There is an implied sense of innuendo and parody in her subversive words and postmodern poise. In other words, her moral and legal consciousness can be suspended as she really does not care about the consequence of her actions anymore. At the moment, it is about the gratification of the self.

Ogeyi’s doting concern is not necessarily about Aloho’s willingness to get a job but about her willingness to do just about anything good or bad to get it. Ogeyi knows that Aloho’s readiness to explore other options having tried the positive option will only end her up in misery hence, her doting concern. But Aloho looks unperturbed as she continues:

Look at me... with all the decency what have I achieved. Where has decency or dignity taken me to? I am tired, I need some rest. Just leave me alone I need to think (soberly). But Ogeyi, you see, I tried to live outside the world all along right from my youth. I see that the world is leaving me behind, can’t you see? You can call me a rebel, but I need a job. That’s what matters to me now. Have I not tried to live a holy life all along? What has become of that, joblessness! Failure, eh? People look at me as a failure. Can’t you see? (9)

Aloho tries to justify her reasons for resolving to breach the natural law. Again, she uses lampoon and euphemism as her representamina in violating the law. Her anger is actually directed at the law (her superego) but she uses mild expressions such as “decency” and “...live outside the world” to suggest her disillusionment with the law and her satirical intent is implied in the word “rebel”. Her action mocks the law. In a similar instance, Scene Two introduces another set of moral dissidents – the Commissioner of Police and Chief Haladu Ade-Amaka, the Honourable Minister of External Relations and a cabinet member of the Federal Republic of Jacassa. The Commissioner understands the law, its sovereignty and the fact that they both have been defiant. So, he admonishes Chief: “Chief, I do hope you will soft-pedal and begin to keep your hands and nose clean?” (19) From his

representamina, it is ironic that the Commissioner who is supposed to be a symbol of legality is symbolising illegality. In his obstinacy and depravity, he simply placates the Commissioner:

(Looking relaxed) Commissioner, I have always told you not to bother yourself unnecessarily about these things. Here, take this. (He opens his portfolio and brings out bundles of naira notes and places them on the table. The commissioner grabs them with the agility of lightening and puts them into his drawer). That should be able to soothe your nerves, commissioner and if you need more, do let me know. (19)

Corroboratively, the Minister's use of language is sarcastic as it insults the moral sensibility of the Commissioner and infringes on the criminal provisions of the law. His action of giving bribe is equally sarcastic. It is also paradoxical to hear the Minister say that the bribe should soothe the Commissioner's nerves. One ordinarily would expect these men to understand the laws of the land better since they are top government officials and elder statesmen. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Chief, a supposed elder statesman, gratifies his insubordination to the law with a bribe. His many years of depravity and immoral living have rendered him morally bankrupt and conscienceless. He hides under the shadow of his high position in the society to keep violating the law and by so doing recruiting more defiant individuals to his illegal camp. He sees himself as being above the law by virtue of his affluence and social status hence, he intimidates the Commissioner: "See that the law is on my side and I shall make sure that the good things are on your side too and that means keeping your job too and of course the Inspector-General seat. I am sure you are still interested?" (21) He uses a satiric representamen to make his selfish point emanating from his id.

Certainly, a rational law can never be on the side of corrupt and evil men. People simply manipulate the law to favour their eccentricity. In this case, Chief is simply telling the Commissioner to join him in disobeying the law. He wants an accomplice in his crime. But in his disillusionment and psychological quandary, the Commissioner answers: "Chief, I shall try, but you have to be careful. I have sensed the signal and I know the danger sign when it appears on the dashboard." (21) It is metaphorical to hear the Commissioner

compare their perverse and disobedient act to the interpretant, a “danger sign”. It is also ironical and comical to see a whole Commissioner of Police who should ordinarily be militant and lion-hearted get jittery while an ordinary appointed Minister is bold.

When people who are supposed to be role models and icons of legality and justice fail in that expectation, they end up setting wrong examples for other people looking up to them as role models. Madam Hoha lets the reader into the character of the likes of Chief and the Commissioner in her reaction to Ochuole’s expression of dissatisfaction with her job: “Of course, most of them are dubious. All they do is stashing government money somewhere through some conduit pipes for the rainy day and he has so many of the pipes in people like you and your types around him there.” (12) Madam Hoha uses representamina – sarcasm and symbolism to condemn the defiant actions of the corrupt government officials.

The Commissioner of Police who is supposed to be a law enforcement officer becomes a law infraction officer. His answer to Chief’s enquiry about his cocaine goods betrays him as an enemy of the law. The Chief asks him: “by the way, how did it go with my goods? My boys told me all was well.” (20) And he answers: “Chief, there was no problem at all. Your goods are safely in the ware house. I directed the DPO there to personally supervise the operations.” (21) Chief and the Commissioner of Police know the positions of the law about hard drugs yet they choose to be iconoclastic. They both use the representamen “goods” as a euphemism in masking the strong term “hard drugs.” The term, “goods” violates the criminal provisions of the law. The Commissioner’s act of supervision of the illegal operation equally infracts the law.

Meanwhile, Aloho is obviously into the drug business. She has wished for a government job despite her desperation. Chief deceives her into believing that she will be nothing more than a protocol officer. He informs Mrs. Obi: “Yes. We are about to have a new staff. She is in fact going to be one of my protocol officers. See what you can do to assist her settle down. The permanent secretary will handle the necessary appointment formalities. Okay?” (35) It is ironic and euphemistic for the Chief to use the representamen “protocol officer” to indirectly mean a peddler.

By deceiving Aloho, Chief once again wins another dissident to his illegal camp. Upon hearing the news of the new job, Ogeyi continues to warn her friend, Aloho, about the company of Ochuole since she is involved in the new job: “(Frowning her face) Ochuole again! (Aside to herself). This name keeps bouncing back like a bad coin. (Facing Aloho directly). So, you are not prepared to listen to advice eh!” (37) Ogeyi uses innuendo, a representamen of resentment, to caution her friend and seek compliance, “So you are not prepared to listen to advice eh!” The use of simile is also evident in the sentence “This name keeps bouncing back like a bad coin”

It is evident that while the law operates on the Freudian principle of superego; characters’ interests often resonate the pride and selfishness of the id. Hence, the perpetual conflict between these two unconscious fields sometimes leads to psychosomatics. Aloho is obviously disillusioned by the perceived excesses of the legal system and its components. She practically gives up on the law and decides to locate meaning within the confines of her feelings. Her friend, Ogeyi, continues to perform that all-important function of an arbiter as she consistently mediates between Aloho’s psychological rivals – their selfish feelings and the law. As a neutral and liberal arbiter, Ogeyi is defeated by the arrogance of her friend’s self.

Aloho allows her desperation and selfish desires to push her into disobeying the law and incurring its wrath. She has suddenly become an outlaw. She has probably been emboldened by the lawlessness of Justice Odili and the Commissioner of Police. Their audacity in violating the law erases all awe that was hitherto held by Aloho for the law. She has earlier been mysteriously extricated from the angry web of the law which catches her for nicotine crime. The registrar points out Aloho’s offence before Justice Odili:

“My Lord, the case is that of one Miss Aloho vs the State. The fact of the case is that Miss Aloho is charged for carrying substances suspected to be cocaine, an offence which is punishable under the law of the land. It is alleged that she was arrested at the Airport on her way to the United States of America when luck ran out on her. The case ... (51)

The depraved Justice cannot deliver justice in the case because he has collected bribe. He has told Chief "... The amount should be raised to one million naira to take care of all the people involved in the case. You see"(49). The use of "people" signifies synecdoche because that is a whole representing the parts – criminal-minded individuals and pretenders involved in the corrupt deal. Therefore, there is no way justice could have been expected from the corruptible Justice. Given this premise, it is then not surprising that he discharges and acquits Aloho "... The prosecutor is not present; it goes to establish the fact that there is no seriousness in the charge being brought before this honourable court, therefore the case is thrown out. The accused is hereby discharged and acquitted." (53)

His hastiness to strike out the case based on a perceived technicality breeds suspicion in the minds of ACP Yakubu and Constable Ojo. Ironically, that judgment exposes the Achilles heels of both Justice Odili and the Commissioner of Police because they are able to spur their prosecutor's moral alertness. Justice Odili and the Commissioner of Police are simply trying to find truth and order outside the domain of the law and in doing that; they make themselves recalcitrant children of the law. As a firm factor, the law has specific ways of enforcing obedience from its subjects. ACP Yakubu represents that triumphant supremacy of the law over every individual in a given society no matter how highly placed. He confronts his boss, the Commissioner of Police, over the unfortunate legal incident and sensing the culpability of his boss in his responses, he dares him to do his worst, resolving to see the case to its logical conclusion:

Sir, you cannot threaten me and do not bother at what hits me but I shall ask you this, since only those who have skeletons in their cupboards need fear. (He lowers his face to him) Sir, do you have any skeletons in your cupboard? Well, as a friend, I have come to warn you to start some sanitation exercise on it because these boys will open the cupboard so wide that the skeleton will not only smell, it will stink. (63)

ACP Yakubu uses innuendo in warning his boss and securing obedience to the law. The depraved behaviour of Chief and the Commissioner of Police completes the beastly metamorphosis of Aloho which starts when she first encounters Ochuole. She is willing to disobey the law having deliberately ensured its moral death in her consciousness. Her new

attitude to the law is visible in her response to the doctor's insistence that her intention to commit abortion was a crime in Nigeria: "my dear young lady, you know that it is against our profession to do such things. Indeed, it is criminal and one can end up in jail for life and even lose his medical license for ever."(66)

To his worry and concerns, she replies: "please Doctor, help me. I am ready to pay any amount you charge." (66) She has suddenly become defiant and hardened. In fact, she is able to recruit the doctor into their bohemian camp because he succumbs to her postmodernist appeal. In submitting to her emotional concerns, he makes the law functionally passive in his heart: "okay lady, how much can you pay! I shall assist you even though I am taking a risk." (66) Her response reeks of negative interpretant – total despair, "the whole life itself is risk Doctor. I shall give you whatever you charge." (66) Aloho is not willing to reason with the law because she has become drunk with the recklessness of herself. Obviously; the failure of her leaders cannot be exonerated from the bestiality that has become her new identity. It is also hyperbolic for Aloho to say she can give whatever the doctor charges.

From the explication so far, it is evident that the business of law is not that of the lawyers alone; it is indeed the concern of everybody in the society. The law as a supreme canon will not also spare anyone in the human society who claims to be above it.

As a creative process, the literary corpus of narratology, dramaturgy and poetry entangle to create a ravishing and mesmerising synergy needed for the effective understanding of the law. It is also argued that the aesthetic representation of the law from the conformist signification is the business of the learned and informed, that is, lawyers and elders while the witness and the accused only corroborate the position (s) of legal officers. They simply react to whatever question they are asked – hence, the reason they have been designated pseudo interpreters in this research.

ACP Yakubu has successfully charged Chief Haladu Ade-Amaka, the Honourable Minister of External Relations, and four other accused persons to court. Poetic euphonies are evident in the charges as they are read out by the registrar:

That you, Chief Haladu Ade-Amaka, Honourable Minister of External Relations and a cabinet member of the Federal Republic of Jacassa,

On the 21st of May, 1997 falsified figures thereby altering the original amount purportedly to be contracts awarded by your ministry to the tune of one point two billion naira on P.V. No. 293 dated 21st May, 1997, an act which is contrary to the provisions of government's financial regulations governing the award of government contracts.

That you Chief Haladu Ade-Amaka on 3rd June, 1997 illegally authorized Miss Ochuole, a Chief administrative office attached to you to apply, sign and collect the sum of five point eight million naira to purchase capital items for your office, a purchase which never took place, an act which is contrary to the provisions of the Financial Regulations guiding Supplies and Finance and Government Stores regulations.

That on 9th October, 1997, acting on an anonymous tip-off, a team of law enforcement agents were dispatched to your residence and in the search that was carried out, large quantities of substances suspected to be cocaine were found there, an act which is contrary to the provisions of the degree establishing the National Drug Law, and on further investigations, more of the substance was found with one Madam Hoha, the proprietress of Akpara Hotel.

That you Chief Haladu Ade-Amaka recruited the Commissioner of Police and Justice Odili and gained their confidence thereby aiding and abetting your obnoxious activities. Guilty or not guilty? (95-96)

The uniqueness of the structures and the repetition of the relative pronoun (that) mark the excerpt with some poetic significance; a supposed protector of the law is now charged with four heinous crimes. The prosecution counsel exemplifies the narratological strand of the aesthetic representation of law in his submission:

Your lordship and members of the jury, the facts are these: in reaction to an article in one of the dailies alleging a fraud against Chief Haladu Ade-Amaka, the Hon. Minister of External Relations to the effect that one

point billion naira could not be properly accounted for assistant Commissioner of Police in charge of the CID, Mr Yakubu swung into action. His investigation took him to the ministry where a clerical assistant in the office of the minister, Mr. Ayo agreed to give information on the acceptance of two thousand naira tip. He agreed to make available photocopies of vouchers connected with the fraud. My lord, if it pleases the court. I shall tender the vouchers marked exhibit A. Also, on a tip-off, law enforcement agents were dispatched to his house where large quantities of substances confirmed to be cocaine were found and were further traced to the hotel of one Madam Hoha, which was discovered later to be indeed a warehouse for the Chief's nefarious activities, a crime which has been effectively covered and protected by very highly placed government public **officers who are themselves supposed to be the custodians of the law**, the Commissioner of Police and a Justice of the law, a situation which has made it impossible for the law to take its normal course on this man and his accomplices. But now, it seems, the law finally catches up with them. These are the facts of the case, my lord. With your permission I shall now call two witnesses to confirm these facts: I call the first prosecution witness, inspector Inaku: (97)

The duty of the witness as a pseudo interpreter of the law is to corroborate the position of either the prosecution or defence counsel. Description, argumentation, exposition, flashback and other key narrative features are evident in the prosecution counsel's argument. He skilfully weaves all these for the effectuality of his submission.

The significance of the law as a creative process can also be found in the dramatic gestures of the prosecution and defence counsels:

Prosecution counsel: My lord, permit me to tender the newspaper as exhibit B, and these wraps as exhibit C.

Judge: You may do so.

Defence counsel: (stands up) with whose permission did you extract that information? I put it to you Mr. Detective that you obtained those vouchers through the applications of duress and intimidation on the greedy and unsuspecting young man.

Prosecution Counsel: (Jumping up) Objection my lord. My learned colleague is insinuating ...

Defence counsel: (Heated up too) My lord, I am not insinuating anything and I want the witness to answer the question. (100 – 101).

In this dialogue, the dramatic import of the legal process is foregrounded. Such representamina as, ‘Jumping up’ and “Standing up” when not invited to, raising of the pitch, expressions of belligerence as suggested by, “ Heated up too” are all suggestive of the dramatic import of the law as a creative process. Ogbeche skilfully presents to the reader the rottenness of the Nigeria society occasioned by her postcolonial bestiality as well as her blatant negligence and insubordination to the supremacy of the law.

Conclusion

Findings from this study show that characters’ representamina in Piercean ideation result in the contravention of the law. Ogbeche reflects and refracts the rot in the Nigerian society, a rot that is emboldened by the defiant attitudes of the elites who should know much about the law and be willing to teach and enforce same by their own attitudes towards the law. Through the words and actions of characters, the law is contravened. The characters do not just contravene the law; they are often aided by the depraved audacity of the microscopic few. In addition, socio-political agents such as unemployment, corruption, peer group influence, bad leadership, and injustice, contribute greatly to the preponderance of violations in the texts. Sometimes, laws are broken circumstantially and not wilfully. When this happens, the culprit is seen as a victim of a dysfunctional society.

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