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Cabalism and Exploitation in War: Okpewho's *The Last Duty*

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Abstract: The theme of cabalism and exploitation in Isidore Okpewho's novel, *The Last Duty*, focusing on the unfair treatment and manipulation of the masses by the ruling class during the war. The author examines the greed and opportunism of the upper class, which leads to the victimization of the lower class in society. Through an analysis of the characters and their actions, the article highlights the profound impact of war on individuals and the tragic consequences of power profiteering and exploitation.

Keywords: cabalism, exploitation, war, ruling class, manipulation, victimization

Introduction

Okpewho's famous novel, *The Last Duty* has been applauded as one of the accomplished novels of Africa to date. It is according to Eustace Palmer "a novel which surely deserves a place in the front rank with *Things Fall Apart*, *The Interpreters*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *The Radiance of a King* and *The Joys of Motherhood*".(43)

The Last Duty is one of the novels written by a writer who was on the Nigerian side during the war. In this novel, Okpewho takes time to examine in detail the question of conscience in a war situation. One remarkable thing about this novel is its representation of the pattern which we see in the Biafran setting – power profiteering, witch-hunting and the exploitation of the weak by the strong. Both sides experienced these evils, showing we Nigerians all the same.

Okpewho's artistry and the manipulation of the point of view and language are unrivaled. The realism of the novel is outstanding. The switching of point of view and language helps us understand fully the circumstances of the characters and their motives. In a horrendous war such as the Nigerian civil war, some people found an opportunity to enrich themselves and to maim their fellows. While the masses were passing through the horrors of the civil war, the opportunists cashed in to psychologically and physically injure and brutalize them.

In this novel, the atrocious act weaves around amorous and proud Toje on the one hand and the family of Oshevire, the poor but dutiful rival of Toje in the rubber business and Odibo, Toje's handicapped cousin, on the other hand.

The relationship between Toje and Oshevire cannot be described in any other term than cannibalistic. Jealous and greedy Toje could not bear seeing Oshevire succeed or prosper in the business where in his own view, he alone should prosper. The witch-hunting and exploitation paradigm is replayed in the relationship of Oshevire, the rubber merchant, who is in detention for trumped-up allegations of sabotage; his wife Aku, who becomes helpless in his absence and Chief Toje, the jealous and indicting opportunist who gets about exploiting Oshevire's absence.

It is the inimical nature and character of Toje that makes him accuse Oshevire of sabotage, to get him detained and to go on to exploit the wife's helplessness in order to maintain his selfish and self-acclaimed importance and greatness, in his own words, his indicting and exploitative nature is revealed. As he boasts:

That is why I have not hesitated to recommend a citizen here for detention on charges of collaboration with the rebels, and then suborned another to draw up the details of the indictment. For I felt that Mukoro Oshevire stood in my way. And that again is why I have not hesitated to seek carnal pleasure with his forlorn wife now that I feel that my manhood is flawed, my potency questioned. (5)

Toje hides under the cover of the civil war to perpetrate and execute his own selfish war.

Toje is one of the chiefs of Urukpe but he is conceited and hardly intelligent. In his own assessment of himself, he asserts:

A town is worth nothing if it has no names on whom its very credit hangs. I am one of those very few names that mean anything here in Urukpe. Everybody knows that - or should... I am a big man, and there is no question about it even if I have to say so over and over... This town has people like me to thank for whatever notice it has achieved today... (5)

His conceit is dramatized as he levels allegations against Mukoro Oshevire as cited earlier. Nwahunanya placing Toje's activities vis-à-vis the reason for the war notes:

When we place the activities of Toje in a broader perspective, the war, the struggle for Nigerian unity- we will be shocked to note that these activities unfold themselves in a war that is being waged to keep the nation one. In other words, Okpewho confronts us with the startling fact that it is not the actual battle in the war front that will be used to keep the nation one. There is also the need to affect the consciousness of individuals and groups in the nation who are represented here by Toje. (76)

In this context, tragedy is found in the concept and meaning of the war. As a nation, the purpose or *raison d'être* of the war is unity; to the masses, the war means suffering and death but unfortunately to the cabals, the war means amassing wealth to themselves through deceit, intimidation and victimization of the weaker individuals.

In a situation as horrifying as the war, Toje cashes in to exploit the government through food supplies to the refugee camps. He does not stop at the incarceration of Oshevire but goes ahead to pay Rukeme and even lectures him to witness against Oshevire in the court, which he ridiculously failed.

In Odibo, Toje's conception is bared and deflated. As far as Toje is concerned, real manhood has everything to do with social importance, being influential and wealthy. It does not consider the means

of the acquisition neither does it consider the inner man or integrity. So when Toje says “It is a curse to be a small man”(119), he means, in Palmer’s words,

That a man without any social standing cannot really talk of his manhood because no matter what his integrity and honesty, he couldn’t really earn the respect of the community. And such a man cannot possibly improve his standing in the eyes of the community because “small men will always think small and act small” (118)

Moreover, Toje also equates manhood with sexual potency and prowess. This is why he cannot bear the fact that he lost his sexual power. In his own words,

Otherwise, how can a man reconcile himself to that title when it seems very clear to him that he no longer possesses, has completely lost – strange as it may sound to a normal mind – that power that gives the title its very definition? (24)

Given his definition of manhood and social and sexual prominence, he ridicules, maims and intimidates Odibo, his cousin. This is because he believes that Odibo being partly invalid is capable of nothing. Since Odibo has no social standing, inadvertently, he cannot boast of sexual power too and therefore, is not a man. In Odibo’s mind, we can read Toje’s words to Odibo:

What use is this awkward mass of body, he said, if you cannot help yourself. And you have no mind. No sense. Nothing. All you have is a huge body. And that is no use to anyone. No use at all, not even to yourself. Utterly useless. (60)

Toje increases his insult on Odibo each time Aku, Oshevire’s wife is present. This is meant to demean Odibo more to prevent any relationship whatsoever between Aku and Odibo, more so, as he uses Odibo’s house for the inimical act.

Odibo is so demeaned by Toje that he believes every bit of Toje’s description of him. “I know I am nothing. I know I have nothing.” (6)

The name “Odibo” means “servant” or “slave”. The author gives this characterization to expose the relationship that exists between Toje and his deprived nephew. When Toje engages in rubber business, Odibo works for him just to be able to eat. As the business changes to food supply, Odibo is also detailed to follow the lorry to get buy the food materials from the bush market and to the distribution centers. Toje does not pay him but meagerly provides him with a poor ration just to keep him alive while he (Odibo) serves him as a slave notwithstanding the blood relationship.

The physical torture is nothing compared with the psychological torture that Odibo receives from his uncle-boss. Though he sees Odibo as a senseless being, he fails to realize that what he lost and was trying hard to resuscitate, Odibo has in abundance; that Odibo’s physical deformity does not affect his sexual desire and performance. Toje’s advances and struggles to have a sexual relationship with Aku are well known to Odibo and sometimes he witnesses these. This knowledge together with Aku’s careless exposure of her body triggers a kind of sexual sensation in Odibo. When he finally consummates this desire, his conception of life and manhood changes. He has a different view of himself too. He says in his excitement:

This is heaven! To have a woman sharing my own bed with me – and not only unwilling to wallow in such lowly circumstances but indeed loving every moment of it and addressing me in the language I could have sworn I would never hear! This must be heaven....(204)

Life afterward becomes meaningful to Odibo. The expression of his manhood changes his perception of himself and he is emancipated from the slavery of Toje and can challenge and even beat up Toje.

In every war, women and children have always been the worst hit as they are more susceptible to the troubled experiences of war. In *The Last Duty*, Aku's plight is worsened, given the fact that she is from a rival tribe against which the war is waged. The dangers of bombs, gunshots and air raids added to the incarceration of her husband and a child to cater for without any source of income make her really vulnerable to the "attacks" of Toje. Besides, the hostility of the entire community marks her out as an outcast and therefore positions her in a pitiable condition. She comes into the scene sharing her dependency and loyalty to her beloved husband, Mukoro Oshevire whom she was willing to pine away for until his release from incarceration. She admits that she and her son are no longer safe and secure in Oshevire's absence. Hostile eyes assail her, no one greets her, and she is isolated for her husband's misguided accusation of being a rebel supporter by Toje. Yet among her catalogue of woes, Toje poses a new kind of danger. He offers her kindness, bringing food, money and cloth through Odibo to her. She can see in Toje's eyes that his gifts have a hidden emotional invoice attached to them. She is right but again, she is helpless. As a suspected rebel without freedom, she is not allowed to go to the market. How do they survive without the food he offers? In her own words:

It is a dreadful thing to be at the mercy of someone, the slave of compulsion you know you cannot fight... Frustration has driven me to the point where I will rather live the fact than the fiction of sin. Loyalty and devotion has been strained beyond all possible endurance. Neither the mind nor the body could any longer fight the overwhelming presence of temptation...the body could no longer be supported by the will of the mind...the entire defense came tumbling down, like an unsheltered mud wall under the relentless down surge of rain... (184)

Through the many encounters with Toje, she wavered between grudging acquiescence and unspoken protest, ashamed to admit it, the urge in her has accumulated like pus in a boil and then she longs desperately to fulfil the desire especially as she departs from Toje's poor performance of regaining his deserted manhood.

Using Aku as the instrument of his nefarious activities, self-gloated Toje fights a guerilla war against Oshevire. Toje's action in sending Oshevire to detention culminates into using his (Oshevire's) wife to test or reinvigorate his manhood. In his own words, "The absence of Mukoro Oshevire ... gives me the opportunity to re-establish my prominence." This absence destabilizing as it may be for Aku provides Toje with plenty of space to unleash his politics of using sex as a weapon of warfare on Aku. In an environment of war, the reader is entertained by his many attempts at taking advantage of Aku's vulnerability to seek restoration for his deserted manhood which is now but a flab of flesh. Toje is finally brought to nothing when his despised and supposedly imbecile nephew, Odibo who was mocked all his life finally gives Aku the touch of manhood she has shamefully longed for.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, the author through the character of Toje reveals to us who the real enemy is, those who make fortune out of the unfortunate situation of the masses and the society. Again, like what we see in *Ike's Sunset at Dawn* where Halima and Fatima are seen as the epitome of the united Nigeria for which the war was aged, Aku is a representation of a united Nigeria and should be praised and not maimed for staying put for the husband despite the fact that she is from the other ethnic group.

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