AWKA JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERARY STUDIES (AJELLS)

Volume 12 Number 2
June, 2025

Sociological Reflections and Egalitarian Impulse in Tess Onwueme's *The Desert Encroaches*

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Abstract

Literature serves as a reflective mirror that illuminates societal paradigms while concurrently wielding the transformative potential to challenge and reshape prevailing socio-political and cultural constructs. Placing Nigeria as a microcosm of the larger African society, this study examines Tess Onwueme's play, *The Desert Encroaches* with a view to exploring the nexus between her dramatic art and the African societal realities. Through the highly allegorical characters and their interactions, Onwueme highlights the tension between the lesser and higher animals, a metaphor for the various social strata in the society. It also reflects on the imperatives of socio-political change. The broad theoretical framework for this study is the sociological theory of literary criticism and Marxism as a subset. The study employs the qualitative method of content analysis to examine the themes and characters of the play. Findings from the study show that the themes of the play are relevant to contemporary issues, while the allegorical characters exemplify how Onwueme uses individual experiences to illustrate broader societal concerns. The study concludes that *The Desert Encroaches* is a powerful work of

literature that offers a commendable insight into the challenges facing Nigerian society and strives towards egalitarianism.

Keywords: African Literature, Drama, Society, Egalitarian, Allegory, Women Writing

Introduction

Tess Onwueme's dramatic works, which are often applauded for their socio-political engagement and commitment to cultural critique, open for a scholarly study into the dimensions of her dramaturgy. Within the literary space, *The Desert Encroaches* is a significant dramatic oeuvre that resonates with sociological issues while concurrently exemplifying a discernible utopian impulse. Literary works are portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in the society. They are a depiction of the different facets of man's life. This intersection of literature and societal experience has been a topic of scholarly interest for many years. They have explored the ways in which literature reflects societal experiences, and how societal experiences influence the creation and reception of literature. In their view, literature is inseparable from the society that produces it as it does not exist in a vacuum. The writer as a creative artist fetches from the experiences of their society. According to Duhan (2015):

> It is impossible to find a work of literature that excludes the attitudes, morale and values of the society, since no writer has been brought up completely unexposed to the world around him. What writers of literature do is to transport the real-life events in their society into fiction and present it to the society as a mirror with which people can look at themselves and make amends where necessary. Thus, literature is not only a reflection of the society but also serves as a corrective mirror in which members of the society can look at themselves and find the need for positive change (p. 192).

Zala (2013) aligns with Duhan's (2015) view by positing that literary works are portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in society. For Zala, they are a depiction of the different facets of common man's life.

Onwueme's development and involvement in the theatre, to a very large extent, beams lights into the struggles of the exploited, deprived, suppressed and oppressed members of the society. From a sociological leaning, one can therefore say that such literary works reflect the society just as the Marxist "reigning ideology incorporates the interests of the dominant and exploitative class, the 'bourgeoisie' who own the means of production and distribution, as opposed to the 'proletariat,' or wage–earning working class" (Abrams & Harpham, 2013, p.204). This concern of the oppressed base by the superstructure is captured in Onwueme's *Then She Said It, The Desert Encroaches, The Reign of Wazobia* and *Shakara: Dance-Hall Queen.* The playwright takes it upon herself to be a dramatic voice in this regard. Through the subtle art of satire laced with revolutionary consciousness, she ridicules the suppressive and exploitative tendencies of the Nigerian system. Onwueme clearly projects her message on 'Sunday Vanguard Arts' in an interview with Nwachukwu & Nneyelike (2011). She explains:

> *The Desert Encroaches* is an allegory (just like *Why the Elephant Has No Butt*) that satirizes social contradictions, hypocrisies, and the marginal existence of many, suppressed, silenced, imposed on and unjustly stifled by a few–the mighty Lions and Hyenas (both male and female powers) against the goats, the sheep, the ants, etc (n.p).

Egalitarian impulse, as used in this study, refers to the drive within literature to affirm equal worth and fair treatment across social groups. It appears in portrayals that resist hierarchy, expose unjust systems and push for shared access to resources, dignity and voice. Rather than imagining a flawless or ideal society, the egalitarian

impulse remains grounded in real conditions, drawing attention to imbalances and calling for change that centers equity. In Marxist literary theory, recognizing this impulse helps to trace how literature supports collective struggle and insists on fairness in the face of structural inequality. Therefore, drawing from the sociological acumen of authors such as Bourdieu (1986), who elucidates the connection between social structures and individual freedom, this study examines how *The Desert Encroaches* transcends its role as dramatic art to become a sociological lens through which broader sociocultural conditions are made visible and subjected to critical inquiry. Attention is also drawn to the elucidation of the human penchant for envisioning improved societal paradigms (Levitas, 2013).

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study is qualitative in nature and thus, analysis is based on the primary text under study. The broad theoretical framework for this study is hinged on the sociological theory of literary criticism, while Marxism serves as a subset. The sociological theory holds that a work of literature is inextricably linked to the society from which it was created. According to Udumukwu (2021) the sociology of literature recognizes the elemental connection between literature and society. It demonstrates how a literary piece may be utilized to comprehend the varied social dynamics of a certain civilization and illustrates the diverse human circumstances inside that society. He further upholds that "sociology of literature is animated by a unique form of organicism and its main thrust is that history, understood in terms of the triadic relationship between writer, reader, and product, circumscribes the literary text" (p.246). The overall objective is to determine the place of literature in society and secondly, the place of society in literature.



Figure 1: The triadic relationship between writer, reader and the literary product

Marxist literary theory, on the other hand, is a critical approach to literature that emphasizes the role of economic and social structures in shaping literary production and interpretation (Lukács, 1971, p.35). According to this theory, literature is not a self-contained art form, but rather a reflection of the larger social and historical context in which it is created (Eagleton, 1976, p.18). Jameson (1971) maintains that Marxist literary critics seek to uncover the ideological and economic dimensions of literary texts, including the ways in which they perpetuate or challenge dominant power relations (p.3). In Georg Lukács' (1971) argument, he contends that literature should instead strive to represent the totality of social reality, and that this can only be achieved through a Marxist perspective. According to Terry Eagleton (1976), literature is inherently political, and Marxist criticism can reveal the ways in which it reflects and reinforces social hierarchies. Jameson (1971) further opines that literary form is intimately tied to social and economic structures, and that Marxist criticism must

pay attention to both the content and form of literary texts. He also contends that literature can be a powerful tool for imagining alternative social structures, and that Marxist criticism should strive to identify these utopian impulses in literature.

Onwueme's Dramatic Art: Societal Reflections and Egalitarianism

Just like Tess Onwueme's *Then She Said It,* in *The Desert Encroaches,* Onwueme brings to the stage the appalling state of the nation. She reveals these ills to the audience while suggesting ways of eradicating them. In the introduction to the play, Steve, Tunji and Onwueme (1985) observe that these handfuls of scums (the exploitative political class) have created a hypocritical system of oppression, exploitation, suppression, and terror, thereby using everything within their reach to keep the masses divided from understanding their common interest. All these are attempts to continuously suppress the thoughts and will of the people. However, it is not that easy to betray a people who have awoken into awareness and conscientization. One could therefore see this dramatic piece as a creative attempt to join hands with all progressive individuals in the society who have refused to accept the crumbs presented by these reckless leaders as relief materials. The larger vision of the playwright here is to equip the people with revolutionary consciousness to fight oppression, injustice, and inhumanity thereby enthroning peace and justice in the nation. None should relegate themselves to the background as a slave of the land, rather, be actively involved in the struggle to rewrite the narratives of the nation.

Steve, Tunji and Onwueme (1985) further argue that the play *The Desert Encroaches* "does not merely record stages and the potential of revolutionary struggle in a gradually escalating war between the rich and the poor" (p. 124). In fact, they note that it is a necessary part of a process of struggle which serves to intensify it. This is because, "the battle of today has shifted from out there to

your stomachs and heads" (p.124). Thus, no one should sit complacent while they watch another take control of their very existence and life. Their position in the preface seems to paint a realistic picture of the current situation of the Nigerian politics. It is something that every member of the society ought to reflect on.

In the first movement of the play, *The Desert Encroaches,* the Town Crier seeing the tension and chaos in the desert flatters the smaller animals to calm them down but to no avail. The Crier did not stop at that; he derides their determination to fight the bigger animals when he sarcastically, states "we are…awaiting man to separate salt from sand… Awaiting dawn from dusk…" (p.135). invariably, their struggle for freedom would not come to fruition since "salt' and "sand" are inseparable when mixed together. This statement, however, is arguable because, as Harry Levin rightly states, unwholesome situations are created by people in the society, and such situations are changeable, especially as they do not favor the majority in the society. Tortoise seems to be the most sensible of all the animals. He calls the other animals to analyze the speech of the Town Crier and leads them to a revolutionary stand to fight for their future. He arouses their consciousness and understanding and gives action to their thoughts.

TORTOISE: Now, leaders of tomorrow... Have you heard the call by Forest Crier?
CHORUS: Yes we have!
TORTOISE: Did you understand it?
CHORUS: Yes we did!
TORTOISE: Now little cow-what does the message say?
LITTLE COW: Calls us animals
LITTLE DONKEY: That is no message
LITTLE DOG: It is a message
LITTLE COW: (*arguing*) we are animals
CHORUS: Yes, we are.
…
CHORUS: Never! Never! We will fight

TORTOISE: (*Laughing)* Fight who?
CHORUS: The Elephants
TORTOISE: For the pasture stolen (pp.139-141)

The animals are obviously aware of their situation and are worried about it. Onwueme in this play achieves a major goal of sensitizing her audience. She needed to endow her characters with social and political consciousness and the will to cooperate with other members of their class to bring about a change. Usually there are poor, marginalized, suppressed members of the society; they work more and get less. Thus, the only way to overcome *their* situation is to fight for their freedom. To achieve this, they draw on oneness and unity.

There is a belief by the animals that the struggle for today will make for a better tomorrow. Tortoise, having succeeded in knowing the feelings of the animals and their stand, urges them to fight for their rights to secure a better tomorrow, bearing in mind that they were used with no compensation and they were ready to fight to regain their freedom and integrity as the chorus responds, "Never! We will fight the elephants for pastures stolen and starvation" (p.140). Tortoise is satisfied that the smaller animals are now together and thinking wisely too. The elephant are their oppressors, (the bigger animals). The animals have come to know that the present leaders have no human feelings; in other words, they are heartless to the less privileged in the society.

LION: We know. None knows this better than me. In my domain, justice, freedom and honour are qualities enshrined in our constitution.
TORTOISE: But not on your conscience…
LION: *(Ignoring him).* We believe in equality, liberty…
TORTOISE: Equality in the degree of crime and shame. Liberty to oppress the rest of us. Which one

> now? Specify. *(Lion embarrassed, coughs, pauses, readjusts himself…)* (p.175).

Onwueme expresses her commitment to the Marxist impulse in this play. The condemnation of the bourgeoisie is unequivocal, and their brazen shows of wealth and affluence where the masses totter from oppression and hunger can best be described as immoral and therefore unpardonable. This righteous indignation is similarly captured in Sowande's *Farewell to Babylon*, Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers*, Soyinka's Madmen *and Specialist, The Trials of Brother Jero* and Kole Omotoso's *The Curse and in the Horizon* (Worugji and Enamhe 2008).

There is a significant shift in the Forest Crier's dispensation and that of his mother's days when people had conscience. He avers, "My mother was born when the world's conscience was deep, deep like a well. As I grew up, the earth's conscience became shallow" (p.145). Put differently, the present generation appears to lack the moral awareness that guided the older generation. Wickedness and heartlessness are the order of the day; "the green leaves in the world's heart, withering each day... for the desert encroaches" (p.145). The image of "withering green leaves" juxtaposes youthfulness with the loss of humanness. "Green", a symbol of strength and growth, signifies the youth, while "wither" stands for decay and death. The implication of this is that the world's conscience is eroded even among the youths. In the words of Onwueme (1985) "…and men fuelling the minds…ambition of the powers like fire ravaging, ravishing the green lands where men plant the hope, their seeds…" (p.145). They act as "thugs" and as "area boys" for politicians and are discarded like empty cans after each election. It is hardly surprising, then, that they fall easily into destructive paths, becoming threats to both human life and the stability of the community. It is in this regard that the Dove further laments their woes "…Desire supplants all. The Iroko, which should shade smaller plants from the sun's scourge… The Iroko, which should give shelter to the little birds of the earth, now

vomits its own fire, scattering the helpless birds to the seven winds and seas" (p.145). This simply suggests that it is only the desires of the powerful that count in the society.

The ruling class utilizes their power to terrorize and disenfranchise the masses; hence, "the Irok, which should give shelter (protection) to the little birds of the earth, now vomits its own fire, scattering the helpless birds" (p.145). The Dove proposes, "together join hands, together spin together" (p.146). Thus making unity the panacea for the world's problem, and not divide and rule as exemplified in Ant's statement: "Alas, the world's game is "Divide and Rule" (p. 148) keep on hold. A similar thematic concern runs through *Then She Said It*, where the multinational companies and the government ride on the people of the Niger Delta, despite housing the crude oil. This Niger Delta scenario is also creatively and symbolically dramatized in Onwueme's *The Desert Encroaches.* The more the people produce, the less they receive, or nothing is given, especially if the bigger animals are interested in it. The hunter's song gives a summary of "winners take all" (p.151), "hunter, I beg you hunter, I implore you. These eggs I laid with my mates. Some, you took one from. Some you took two from. But mine you must take all. Is it just?" (p.152). The scale of injustice is overwhelming, yet undeniable. One striking example lies in the politics of world power. The situation in Nigeria's Niger Delta echoes Elimimian's (1994) assertion that "the conquered African was exploited not only in the West but in his fatherland where his cash crops, minerals, and other natural resources were siphoned away into foreign lands" (p.33).

Some other animals also lament this symbolic milking of the Niger Delta region. In the play, the Cow says, "see the sore in my infested udders, exploited to the bosom" (p.157). Having endured a festering wound in her udder, she speaks in anguish and resignation: "Oh! My unborn child. I wish you would come without breast for the world to milk and fight for" (p.163). This

haunting line captures more than personal grief. It crystallizes the brutal struggle over resource control in the Niger Delta. The region, ravaged by oil spills and environmental destruction, is treated not as a priority but as a battleground. The real tragedy lies in the failure of the state to protect its land and people, while the political elite argue over how to share the wealth extracted from a place they neither belong to nor suffer with. Those regions untouched by the environmental devastation, often reap the greatest share, while leaving the people of the Niger Delta to bear the cost without justice or recognition (Nwoga 2022). "They siphon the juice away and leave us with mere sand, with no grazing land…" (p.159). Ikiriko (1999) corroborates this when he observes:

> Pipelines criss-cross the seabed piping, not drinkable water to the population, but siphoning oil and gas to enrich other lands and lives. Upcountry, well away from the smokes and stench of the oil wells, oil concessionaries of all sorts wake up millionaires on daily basis. Down the Delta, in the fountain of oil and gas, the natives wake up bereft of their traditional means of livelihood (pp.6-7).

The revenue from the oil in the Niger Delta provides funds for government use, yet, the indigenes are barely compensated for the devastation that oil drilling causes. Youths in the areas cannot farm, fish or explore age-old traditional occupations of the forebears. The result is restive youths, kidnapping of expatriates and pipeline vandalization. Tortoise in the play is a symbol of the radical youths in the Niger Delta who reason beyond other youths (represented by Ant and other smaller animals in the play) in the environment. Such radicalism in the region is what births the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) by Olusegun Obasanjo in 2000 with the mandate of developing and improving the livelihood of the oil-rich Niger Delta region.

Nigeria's status as an oil-producing nation has fueled deep tensions over who owns and controls its resources. Ogbogbo (2003) points out that the absence of a widely accepted formula for managing these resources continues to provoke unrest within the federation. This unresolved question of control is dramatized in Onwueme's *The Desert Encroaches* (1985), as noted by Worugji and Enamhe (2008). In the play, the smaller animals are denied access to their rightful share. Their demands for justice are met with intimidation and confinement, leaving them with no option but to prepare for confrontation.

DOVE: Dogs blunt your teeth

DONKEY: But the teeth are all we have

CHORUS: Must we also be deprived of them?

DOG: Have I not always been in chains? My entrance and exits zoned? And my masters, masters of my world? With these teeth, I run their errands, and execute with my teeth. The active ones they extracted, 'cause they feared I'd used them to advantage. And now this little life in me, these few teeth left, I must blunt?

CHORUS: No! No! No! We have served long enough. The little crumbs they send to us as relief to save their faces from the guilt of our starvation-it is choking (pp. 153-154).

Virtually everyone of the "lesser" animal is being exploited. In the play, the Donkey says, "and the flood of my sweat and blood on the fields tilling and ploughing. The earth I mine, the seeds I man, but the harvest, I am 'manned' to trade my lot and load for their luxury" (p.154). Nevertheless, while we comment on the system of sabotage, exploitation, and oppression, one thing is clear, and that is, the perpetration of these evils is aided by some of the "sons of the land" against their own people (Oburumu and Nwoga 2024). For instance, during the election process in Nigeria, thugs (who are made up of the people) are hired to disrupt the election process, thereby creating room for the manipulation of results in favor of

the dubious politicians. In addition, some of the electorates and political delegates receive large chunks of money in foreign currencies as bride to vote in an incompetent candidate. The 2022 primary elections and the 2023 general elections in Nigeria were specifically characterized by this.In Onwueme's *The Desert Encroaches* the Tortoise puts it:

> But all the faults are not theirs. Are they not aided by sons for our land to manipulate us? Our dogs are servile. They bark and bark at noon at us and threaten their brethren with their growl. But to the master they wag their tail. As the master eats, they rush for crumbs around the bush or they stand and observe the movement from hand to mouth… (pp. 155-156).

Worugji and Enamhe (2008) observe that the experiences of the animals in the play reflect the character of the Nigerian state. Insecurity and intimidation cut across all levels of power, including among the leaders, who represent foreign governments. The satire is clear in the depiction of Nigeria's continued dependence on foreign investors, as the foreign-backed government is shown to look down on the Nigerian government. This structure mirrors the exploitation and domination typical of colonial rule. Though the colonial masters are no longer physically present, the spirit of colonialism still operates through systems that sustain external control and internal submission. There is a sense of arrogance from foreign investors towards the Nigerian government because the Nigerian government looks up to them. Perhaps, it is like another form of slavery on the part of the Nigerian government. On the other hand, we can also read this meaning into Tortoise's reports: "All the faults are not theirs. Are they not aided by sons of our land to manipulate us?" (p.155). If they were not encouraged by our own government, they would not be here. This brings to mind the popular saying that, "a house that is divided cannot stand". The nation of Nigeria is divided against itself and outside forces have capitalized on the situation

to exploit and manipulate her. Almost nothing works in the nation due to the high rate of politicking in the administrative sector as the play reveals. This reminds us of Fanon's (1980) argument that, "if conditions of work are not modified, centuries will be needed to harmonize this world which has been forced down to animal level by imperial powers" (p.79). Just like the Donkey in the play, the masses are used in the fields, to till and plough the earth, but at harvest, they are manned while the government enjoys the fruits of their labor. Sadly, government functionaries drop "little crumbs... as relief ... from the guilt of their starvation ..." (*The Desert Encroaches,* p.154), in order to save their faces.

The truth is that, Nigerians are enemies to themselves; they are reduced to the level of animals, i.e. dogs. They bark at themselves and smile at their enemies (the foreign parasites) who claim to be interested in her development. They are referred to as parasites because their survival hinges on Nigeria's natural resources. The struggle for control has become politicized, leaving individuals scarred both physically and emotionally. Among all, the masses bear the harshest blows. The statement by Cow, "Oh! See, see the sore in my infested udders, exploited to the bosom..." (p.137), is cryptic and true. Kristololu (2002) observes that "poverty itself, and the inhibitory culture it spawns, is a product of the economic processes" (p.116).

In the play, the bigger animals and the middlemen agree to speak with one voice to exploit and defraud the masses. They deceitfully claim to believe in equality and liberty. This is what the Tortoise describes as " equality in the degree of crime and shame. Liberty to oppress us" (p.175). As a block, the lions believe that they must speak with one voice, each scratching another's back. He says, "You, Hyena, know what I mean? Solidarity... solidarity even in sin *(they all laugh).* Hyena, on the other hand, replies:

Don't worry. We're there to protect ours and your

> interest. Who is fooling who? You'll be well supplied from us, but of course, when it's time to debate and vote, we'll join them to agree that you should be perpetually ostracized. No one must have contact or contract with you. You know the routine agreements, treaties and so on. Those are mere round table paper agreement (p.169).

Worugji and Enamhe's (2008) position here is that it reveals the political deceit and fraud in signing agreement paper by the administration of the nation. The statement "as a block we must speak with one voice" (p.168) satirizes the government's use of the words "cooperation' and "understanding" as the language of corruption. The Wolf in this gathering represents those used by the government to carry out selfish aims while the needs of the masses are ignored. The Wolf, who the bigger animals claim to act as a middleman between them and the smaller animals, is another example of betrayal and selfish behavior prevalent in the Nigerian system. Through this, Onwueme (1985) satirizes the deceitful nature of the federal government. The issue is that the officials who act as the middle men are as corrupt as the government they represent. The government is aware that their activity is unacceptable, as the passage reveals. Yet, they still participate in fake paper agreements with their so called foreign investors. The nation is curbed of all illegal elements and those officials enrich their pockets at the same time.

In the play, Lion appears to dominate the other animals through the authority and power he holds as their leader. *Just like* Orwell's ((1976) *statement in Animal Farm* through Napoleon one of the powerful *animals on the farm,* "all *animals* are equal but some are more *equal than others" (p.15).* Perhaps due to their leadership position, *"all animals are* equal" in the context of this play. This implies that all human *beings are equal* and none *is* stronger than the other. The amount of food required for the poor to survive is no different from what the leaders themselves need. If *both starve,* as

experimented in the story told *by the narrator, the* same pains the poor suffer as a result *of starvation are what the rich will also suffer. The narrator states '...when it became unbearable (hunger) they both mutually requested peace and began to have mutual respect for each other..." (p.179). Hunger and starvation are enemies to any human with a stomach.* In the play, Tortoise argues that the duty and responsibility of the proletariat is to revolt and strip the bourgeoisie of their privileged economic and political status and to place the ownership of all property in a commonwealth which will then be distributed to the people fairly and equitably; wealth is held in trust for all. Jiri Hajek in Worugji and Enamhe (2008) summarises this idea by highlighting that literature serves as a critical examination of reality, primarily through the lens of the fundamental conditions necessary for human self-realization. Its primary purpose is to raise awareness of human responsibility, both on an individual level and collectively. Furthermore, it emphasizes that literature should continually challenge and protest against any forces or circumstances that strip individuals of their right and reduce them to passive beings controlled by destiny and historical forces. In essence, literature serves as a means of awakening awareness, accountability and resistance against dehumanizing forces that strip people of dignity. It reflects the idea that a sense of responsibility can extend across the wider population. This is similar to Onwueme's message in *Ban Empty Barn*, *The Desert Encroaches*, and *Then She Said It*.

In Worugji and Enamhe's (2002) analysis of *The Desert Encroaches*, they highlight that Tess Onwueme enacts the influence of power drunkenness. The popular saying, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely", is revealed here. There is exploitation of the masses by foreign investors with internal complicity. They capitalize on the poverty-ridden masses and the hungry leaders of the community. They trick the leaders first. Who now use the same trick on their own citizens. As Birago Diop explores in his poem "Omen" interpreted by Elimimian

(1994) that "the colonizers infiltrated themselves into Africa, some as Christians, others singing pacts with the local leaders or flattering them with gifts such as perfumes…ultimately, the gullible African loses" (p.39). In some cases, not all the citizens are fooled as one of the smaller animals reveals.

They further posit that the smaller animals advocate for peace, which can only reign when the bigger animals (government or foreign investors) recognize and respond to their feelings (the masses of the society). One of the smaller animals validates this position by attesting "we are friends so long as no one tramples on me….so long as we have mutual respect" (p.190). At the same time, there are some middle men that cannot be bought. Tortoise represents one of these men. He rejects the food and drinks offered him during the gathering and mobilizes the smaller animals to rise in protest:

> **HYENA:** Now friends, may I move that we commemorate the rise of the new sun…. this new dawn with feast. This is our world order. Let there be heavy eating, drinking, and dancing. Let the drummer lead our feet *(Chorus of animals of the south excitedly preparing feast…)*
>
> **TORTOISE:** *(protesting)* ridiculous! You want to feast with powers who suck you dry? To dull your nerves to wine and rice, while the wants of those you profess to present are dying in hunger. This is treachery. This must not happen! (p.190).

Earnestly, just as Onwueme dramatizes, there is always a time when you can no longer push people to the wall; a point of recognition. As the Chorus puts it, "we have come to force our leaders to stop their hypocrisy, restore human dignity, stop exploitation and forceful manipulation of peace" (p.191). Indeed, they have risen to say no bones. Like the Dogs, everyone likes flesh; the good benefits of democracy and good governance.

When we connect the dots, it becomes apparent that the masses require leaders to mobilize and guide their actions, for the progress and socio-political stability of the nation. Obafemi (1994) argues that:

> Collective change of society is absolutely ideal. And even within the collectivity, you have the single individuals who are the leaders, who are the prime movers, the inspiring forces. So when we talk of collectivity, we are more or less bringing together various individuals…forces merged as one colossal force (p.119).

Tess Onwueme's dramaturgy calls for a collective and individual reaction. Its reach extends into many aspects of societal life, rather than focusing on a single part or concern. In the words of Erwierhoma (2002), "…her ideals enable the audience to reappraise their lives, raise their consciousness and change their situation for the better" (p.123).

The white man who claims to be interested in the upliftment of Nigeria, according to the play has a hidden agenda. Indeed, hypocrisy is the language of the world. It is ridiculed in the play. The truth is that, no foreign country smiles with any third-world country without any major gain in return. Thus, the continuous unholy romance with Nigeria, China, USA etc.

This has been the trend since the colonial era. The director leaves a final remark thus:

> *Yes,* I *can see* a new dawn coming… A *new sun rises.* And the dead are rising *from their graves.* My people, no matter *how* under developed may be our economy and social life, we must not only ask for peace but force it to be accepted. The people are on the march and their growing insistence that human deprivation in all its forms be ended must prevail. Will you join hands with the other forces in making the world a better place for us to live? The survival

> of the world depends on you? Make your decision now! (p.191).

This is a call to duty, as the director makes it clear that it is not enough to ask for peace insistently but to "force it to be accepted". The director's words convey a sense of hope and urgency. It speaks of a new beginning, symbolized by a new dawn and a rising sun. The author emphasizes that despite economic and social challenges, people should not just seek peace but actively work to make it a reality. The passage calls for unity and collective action in addressing human suffering and improving the world. It underscores the idea that the world's survival hinges on individual and collective decisions to create a better place to live. One can therefore underscore the significance of Tess Onwueme's oeuvre as a formidable literary vessel that not only mirrors the world but aspires to reshape it through the catalytic power of the utopian impulse.

Conclusion

Literature mirrors the society for us to see not just the good but also our flaws and make adjustments where needed (Nwoga 2023). Onwueme's *The Desert Encroaches* succeeds in addressing socio-political realities in Nigeria and shows the reckless wielding of power by political leaders. Her vision is to free the Nigerian people from all kinds of suppression, oppression, and inhumanity. She wants to enhance and equip the masses with the necessary revolutionary weapon to fight for freedom and enthrone lasting peace in a nation where equal opportunity is given regardless of class, ethnicity, etc. For Onwueme, unity is the key to success. The play portrays a typical class society with Hyena, Lion and other bigger animals in the play at the upper echelon, while Sheep, Dog, Donkey and other smaller animals are consigned to the bottom. The bigger animals depend on the sweat of the smaller animals for sustenance. In spite of the widening gap, the usual pretense of the super powers is unmasked by the end of the play such that the smaller animals, having realized their position, stand and fight

oppression, suppression and exploitation (Worugji and Enamhe 2008).

This study therefore contributes to the growing body of scholarship on African literature as it offers valuable insights into the ways in which societies are shaped and how individuals navigate these complex dynamics. This study concludes that *The Desert Encroaches* is a powerful example of how literature can contribute to our understanding of the world around us and inspire us to address the challenges we face.

Authors Contribution Statement

The authors contributed to all aspects of this study, including conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, and project administration.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the study, authorship, and publication of this article. All resources used in the study were independently sourced by the authors.

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