



The Perfidy of the Nigerian State: The Interface between the Leadership and the Followership in Tony Marinho's *The Epidemic*

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ABSTRACT

The postcolonial Nigerian nation is characterised by diverse economic and socio-political quagmires that have threatened her corporate existence. Although she survived a fratricidal civil war, her myriads of problems, which have naively been attributed to the dearth of quality leadership, have continued unabated. In a nation bedevilled with unprecedented economic and socio-political woes, exemplary leadership is perceived to be the sole catalyst to galvanise the much sought-after development. This paper rethinks this redundant postulation. Employing the rights/responsibilities perspective for a critique of Tony Marinho's *The Epidemic*, it denounces recourse to castigate only the leaders for the nation's plethora of problems. It avers that until the followers begin to hold the leaders accountable, thus invariably advancing quality followership, their activities will continue to smack of connivance in the nation's maladies. It argues that both groups are required to liberate the nation from her self-inflicted, neo-colonial retrogressive nuances that have casted aspersion on the bastion of our national life. It submits that since Nigerians are not statutorily barred from engaging in a sustained interrogation of the actions, and inactions, of the leaders, her people should not shirk from their constitutionally imposed responsibilities.

Key words: Postcolonial Nigerian nation, leadership, development, rights/responsibilities, followership,

INTRODUCTION

It is a truism that contemporary Nigerian nation is bedevilled with so many challenges of unquantifiable proportion. While her economy is comatose with people wallowing in abject poverty in the midst of plenty, her infrastructure is in a state of utter neglect with roads, schools, corporations and agencies begging for government attention. In a largely monolithic, oil-dependent economy, the global downward trend in the oil prices has occasioned a sharp decline in her economic fortune. Besides administrative ineptitude that has become a pastime, corruption has been institutionalised despite the avalanche of various anti-graft agencies in Nigeria. Political offices have become an avenue to divert state fund into private pockets with impunity. While the successive military regimes, with messianic pretext, have foisted dictatorial rule on Nigerians, their civilian counterparts have never lived up to their campaign promises. The nation thus seems to be on the edge of the precipice with no solution in sight. In such clime, creative writings have foregrounded recourse to literature which depicts the odious realities of contemporary Nigerian state. With writings like Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and *Anthill of the Savannah*, Femi Osofisan's *Aringidi and the Night Watchmen*, Niyi Osundare's *State Visit*, Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu*, Wale Okediran's *Tenants of the House* and Tayo Olafioye's *Parliament of Idiot* amongst others,

Nigerian literature has provided a vista for a sustained exposé of the Nigerian economic and socio-political situations.

A common thematic thrust in these texts is their commentaries on the activities of corrupt and ineptitude leaders. While *A Man of the People*, *State Visit*, *Tenants of the House* and *Parliament of Idiot* condemn civilian leaders for their corrupt tendencies and general moral laxity, *Anthill of the Savannah*, *Aringidi and the Night Watchmen* and *King Baabu* do not spare the military adventurers for their activities which are clearly at variance with what obtains in civilise clime. Although these texts critique the intellectual foundation of leadership in Nigeria, their penchant to heap the blame of a failed nation only on the leaders make their treatise susceptible to repudiation. In his *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Achebe () has, unequivocally, traces the cause of the nation's retrogressive march to the doorstep of the leaders:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or viability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership (118).

Although the leaders have not discharged their duties to the nation selflessly and conscientiously, the thrust of this study is that the followers cannot be 'discharged and acquitted' of the maladies bedeviling the nation. It is our considered opinion that the followers are as guilty as charged in the affairs of the nation. This is because the plethora of ills befalling Nigeria demands all hands to be on deck.

A Critique of Leadership Crisis in Tony Marinho's *The Epidemic*

Tony Marinho's *The Epidemic* (1992) is a classic reflection of the treachery, insincerity, sycophancy, perfidy, cover-up and blackmail that have characterised Nigeria's odious march towards the abyss of under-development. It x-rays the nation's retrogressive governance and visionless leadership. It highlights the unpatriotic resolve of her leaders to hold on to power no matter whose ox is gored. It elicits the knack for corrupt enrichment and self-perpetuation in office, tendencies which cast aspersion on public officers' claim to integrity. It exposes the manner by which public officers abuse their offices and cover up their track under the guise of adherence to the interest of the state. It also chides the citizenry for being lily-livered hence suffers in silence and bears the brunt of mis-rule. It rebuffs the people for lacking the gut to take their destiny in their own hands. It, however, commends the patriotic adventures of her scientists and researchers for their determination and resolve to engage in researches for public good. Their trail-blazing scientific discoveries, despite the scorn and disdain from a non-appreciative government, amount to good commentary for the nation. It also projects the image of the nation which had been smeared by government directionless leadership.

A deadly epidemic ravages the nation. So fatal is the epidemic that it kills without notice. It strikes its victim, overpowers him, makes him unconscious and defies any attempt to revive him. It accounts for the loss of over eight thousand lives with the tendency to continue if not checked! Unfortunately, the origin and cause of the epidemic is unknown while the vaccine to either stop or alleviate its scourge in the country is not readily available. As the nation continues to wait for government intervention, the Council of Ministers holds regular executive sessions with the president to discuss the way forward and unravel the causes and cure of the epidemic. The minister of health does not mince words on the devastating nature of the epidemic:

The epidemic affects the different parts of the country; the North, South, East and West. Everywhere. Over two thousand deaths have been reported in each of these areas. We do not know the origin of the disease. The number of deaths is increasing daily and is compound by our non-existent emergency services and low stocks of useful medicines. If something is not done soon the chances are that the population shall be decimated (1-2).

To prevent further death and expected public outcry, he enjoins the Council of Ministers to call for international assistance in form of "intravenous fluids, drugs, and personnel".

The submission of the minister of health exposes the beast in the members of the council on whom the fate of the nation rests. While the minister of external affairs rebuffs the suggestion on account of its alleged implication for the nation's international reputation, the minister of economics and planning would have none of it may lead to a decline in the value of the naira! Even the finance minister is against any decision which would invariably lead to increased budgetary allocation to the ministry of health. Expectedly, the president is encouraged to jettison the advice of the minister of health. He orders the denial of the epidemic because in his opinion, party interests should take pre-eminence over public interest:

When we make decisions here in this room, we make them primarily in the interest of this government and secondly in the interest of the people of this great Nation of ours. Our party interest must of course guide the interest of the government...I agree with the Minister of Health that one would save a few thousand lives by getting what he is proposing. But the relative gain in that direction would be far outstripped by the relative loss in public image, credibility, earnings and bargaining power and of course political advancement for the government (6-7).

This is quite unbecoming of a civilian president who rides to public office on the back of the electorates. A cursory look at the actions and inactions of the ministers reveals that they are not worthy of the public offices they occupy. Many of them are merely interested in the paraphernalia of office. Consequent on this, they dare not disagree with the president who has the power to hire and fire. They so much cherish their 'hard-earned' offices such that they must concur to whatever the president says, either they hear him or not! They care no hoot what becomes of the nation once their bank accounts swell. At the risk of losing his exalted office, the vice-president has to be seen supporting his boss. He shouts the minister of health down when the latter objects to the regular reduction in his ministry budgetary allocation:

Look here, Honourable Minister of Health. Everyone has a job to do. I mean we are all trying to do our jobs. But there have to be checks and balances...It is the Minister of Finance's task to check and introduce balances. He did not know there would be the epidemic (3-4).

At last, the recalcitrant minister of health has to mellow-down when he is faced with blackmail over his past misdeeds in office, particularly his role in "the drug importation scandal". The secret file on him has shown that he is far from being a saint he professes. Besides other evidences of his loot in office, the president blackmails him into submission:

He was surprised that they knew about the Medical equipment supply company that he had set up and given about thirty million naira worth of contract to...He wondered if they knew about the account in Budapest. They did...As if that was not enough, the President read off a list of houses, flats and even a mansion...the President read out a list of contracts for which the Minister was expecting a Peugeot 505 Saloon Car, a cheque for one hundred thousand dollars, a free ticket to fly around the world and complete furnishing of his newly built chalet at Tarkwa Bay, a holiday resort across the lagoon (14).

This revelation finally forces him to change gear.

If the minister of health is perceived to be sincere in his determination to investigate and solve the menace posed by the epidemic, further revelation exposes his inadequacies. He is not genuinely interested in fighting the epidemic but wants its existence to be acknowledged for him to have more fund, locally and internationally, to feather his own nest. He has counted on local and international donations to fight the epidemic, fund he would divert to personal use. Every natural occurrence or public policies have been maximised immensely to his benefit:

What really had upset him was the fact that since the Government refused to acknowledge the epidemic it could not set up a relief fund. No relief fund meant no Government donations and more importantly no external donations. He remembered how much he had made during the Sahelian drought and more recently during the expulsion of aliens from the country ⁽¹⁸⁾.

His position therefore is self-serving and not for altruistic intention. As a face-saving measure, he has to quickly organise an official trip to government medical institutions. This is a smoke-screen towards the official cover-up. Since he has to be seen as working, he employs crude tactics of commanding obedience from the staff in his ministry. He orders a memo, which completely 'obliterates' the sign of the epidemic from their memory! However, he protects himself and his 'privileged' team on the trip to the rural clinic. In fact, he embarks on the trip in the first instance to garner fund to travel outside the shore of the country, check on his foreign bank accounts and escape the epidemic with the members of his family. Nemesis however catches up with him.

Like their counterpart in the health ministry, other ministers have to play along with the president so as to keep their respective jobs. So myopic is the quality of their advices that a discerning mind begins to wonder if their loyalty is actually to the country or the president. Since they must act according to the president's body language, they literally read several implications to the upsurge of the epidemic to convince the president of their genuine concern for the nation. Although they wear protective masks to the cabinet meetings, the minister of transport still blame the Americans for the epidemic while the minister of aviation heaps vituperation on the Russians. On his part, the minister for youth and culture casts aspersion on the South Africans for the country's woes. None has the effrontery to speak the truth they know so well. Such is the character of people at the helms of affairs in Nigeria.

Besides the ministers, even the president does not comport himself as a patriotic leader worthy of emulation. Instead of arrogating to himself the onerous task of ameliorating the plight of the people who are ravaged by the epidemic, he resolves to deny its existence as a matter of fact. He coerces the ministers into following this path of perfidy. He blackmails the equally corrupt minister of health to deny the epidemic in the face of several deaths. He believes once he keeps his office, nothing else matters in life. To achieve this, he keeps a security file on his ministers who can only oppose him at their peril! He even arranges an electronically teleguided prepared speech which the minister of health 'reads' on air to a bemused nation. He is so callous and evil-minded such that he 'arranges' a road accident for a University of Toro Medical team on a fact-finding mission. He orders the immediate transfer of Dr. Ahmed and Professors Aliu and Nwafor to the Archives Department of the health ministry for revealing information on the epidemic to the nation. He ensures that this decision is gazzetted with immediate effect. He instructs the Police Force to raid, close and burn uncooperative media houses! To him, the people's lives are nothing compares to the benefits that accrue to him as the president. He so much enjoys the paraphernalia of office that he holds daily cabinet meetings where deliberations centre principally on how to deny the existence of the epidemic. He is so gullible that his ministers capitalise on his weakness to tell him only what he wants to hear! He even proposes to travel to Greenland when the entire nation gropes in fear and affliction. He unilaterally votes fund to purchase drugs without recourse to the National Assembly. He readily comes to mind as a sit-tight dictator whose major concern is self-perpetuation in office.

The Gown and Social Commitment

Professor Abubakar, Head, Department of Medicine, University of Toro, is a sad man because the affliction of the people multiples as the epidemic ravages the nation. He enjoins fellow professionals, like Professors Adenuga and Agah of Statistics and Anatomy Departments respectively, to assist in researching into the cause and prevention of the epidemic. Although these researchers get a clue from their investigations that a victim of the epidemic has blisters and rashes at the mouth and feet, their inability to get a survivor hinders their efforts. Fortunately, an intellectual discussion between Dr. Darna,

a rural medical doctor, and Dr. Patkin, a veterinary doctor, gives insight into the likely causes of the epidemic and those that are prone to or immuned from it. Dr. Patkin suspects the epidemic has link with rinderpest epidemic which once ravaged the animals. He submits that the cattle-rearing communities may have been immuned from it because of their earlier encounter with rinderpest virus through their cattles. This, he further suspects, may have accounted for its devastating consequences particularly in non-cattle, rinderpest-free urban communities! The rising death rate in the rural areas is largely due to urban-rural migration and the attendant cohabitation of the people. They also conduct an empirical survey of some rural areas to have accurate statistics of the death rate. Convinced about their discovery, they agree to send it to experienced academics at the University of Toro.

Meanwhile, the research team at the University of Toro is on the verge of having similar discovery. Professor Adenuga's research has revealed that little or no cattle-rearer is afflicted by the epidemic. Professor Nwosa, Head, Veterinary Department, does not agree less. Their research findings tally with the information from Drs. Darna and Patkin thus, they agree to send their findings to the government for prompt actions and interventions. However, when their discoveries do not produce the desired government interest and attention, Professor Abubakar sends it to the prestigious English Medical Journal for publication. Research interests now shift to the discovery of antibodies from survivors or the immuned. Drs. Okon and Amadun collaborate with British officials to discover antibodies meant to fight the epidemic. These antibodies are taken from the minister of health whose plane has been quarantined. They work perfectly. Professor Abubakar's team continues its investigation by vaccinating several people. The result is good hence, it is again sent for publication.

The beast in the president is let loose again! Since he can no longer convince the nation that the epidemic is non-existing, he owns up at last. He, however, blames foreign 'adversaries' for it. He orders a security search and surveillance on offices and homes of members of the research team. They are to remain silent for ever else the government would further humiliate them. Even the people soon forget them. Ironically, while they suffer humiliation at home, Professor Cummings is celebrated and even knighted in England! It takes the acknowledgement of their findings abroad for them to be accorded the desired respect and accolade. Also a change in government restored their honours and privileges.

The novel, once again, brings to the fore the age long 'animosity' between the town and gown. The town is a euphemism for the society while the gown is a symbol for the academic. While the former prides itself as the policy executor, the latter is committed to research, experiment and policy formulation. Ironically, it depends on the former for political-will to have its policies implemented. Unfortunately, most Nigerian leaders are not favourably disposed to academic researches. They seek immediate gain in most of their endeavour. They are self-centred and intellectually naive to know that in the long run, researches have long-standing benefit for the society at large. They therefore earmark insufficient fund for researches in the various institutions and government agencies. Little wonder Drs. Darna and Patkin's research interests do not enjoy government attention and support. If the entire medical team on a fact-finding mission can be 'sacrificed' on the altar of a self-seeking public interest, if senior academics, like Dr. Ahmed, Professors Aliu and Nwafor, can be made redundant for revealing information on the epidemic to the public, if hardworking academics, like Professors Abubakar, Adenuga, Agah and Nwosa are humiliated, dehumanised and silenced for publishing their research findings in a reputable journal, then no one should be left in doubt about the utter neglect which was accorded researchers like Drs. Darna and Patkin who practice in the rural areas. The powers-that-be do not bother about the fate which befalls them, the commitment they put into their works notwithstanding.

Tony Marinho's *The Epidemic* depicts the societal ills bedeviling the nation. It chides a non-responsive government, enmeshed in self-glorification and corrupt enrichment, as the bane of the nation. It satirises the naivety of the personalities who relish in the 'good fortune' in public offices. It exposes their perfidy and treachery but warns of the peril which awaits them. The minister of health merely supports the need for government intervention to fight the epidemic so as to have access to relief fund from government and international agencies. He has to play along with the status quo, knowing the consequences of not. He, thus, has his ways and takes his family abroad at government expense. Unfortunately for him, the

epidemic he runs away from at the rural clinic eventually inflicts him with fatal consequence. He becomes an 'item' for scientists who require the antibodies to fight the epidemic. More importantly, his loot ends up in other hands. While his foreign accounts are seized by the banks, family members and relatives are engrossed in 'battle' to have their share. Marinho's testament on this attests to the futility of wealth acquisition:

Wisened to the fact of his death by the news of the epidemic, all the big international banks had checked their files to determine if the late minister had been on their client list...Those that found him on their lists were cautiously delighted. They at first checked the contents of the safety deposit boxes and balances in the accounts. Then they had to check the mode of making a withdrawal. That meant that the banks were free to close that account on the demise of their customer and utilize the money or valuables for their own, usually the manager's use

(114-115).

With this reality, one can only wonder if there is any benefit in ill-gotten wealth which ends up in other people's hands.

Criminal Silence and the Act of Connivance

Also, the people are expected to serve as check on the government. Even if government desires to betray the confidence repose in it, it is incumbent on the people to call the men and women in public offices to order. African history is replete with the resolve of the people to alter government policies that they consider inimical to public goods. Evidences have it that victory over injustice is assured, though it may not be achievable on a platter of gold. Unfortunately, while those in government continue to play politics with a matter of life and death, the people ignorantly believe whatever the government tells them! Even if the government derives satisfaction in denying the existence of the epidemic in the text, its reality ought to have compelled the people to react and confront the government. This inaction encourages the minister of foreign affairs to publicly deny the existence of the epidemic even after media attacks on the demise of the health minister. If the people have protested the transfer of Dr. Ahmed, Professor Aliu and Professor Nwafor to the Archives Department, if they have reacted angrily to the humiliation meted out to Professors Abubakar, Adenuga, Agah and Nwosa, perhaps the government would have turned a new leaf. Once these academics are 'silenced' and made redundant, the people soon forget about them, especially when the epidemic has subsided. No wonder Dr. Darna is pessimistic about any meaningful change emanating from the people.

Meanwhile, a sustained investigation of Tony Marinho's *The Epidemic* does not elicit an all-round catalogue of woes. Although the politicians are casted in bad light, the text presents a ray of hope in the nation's scientists and researchers. For every mis-directed politician, there is a researcher whose effort is geared towards promoting and sustaining the overall wellbeing of the people. Researchers like Drs. Darna, Patkin, Okon, Amadum and Professors Abubakar, Adenuga, Agah and Nwosa are committed to their researches despite the hostility from the government. Dr. Darna's mobile clinic does not present itself as a comfortable, well-equipped medical 'institution', yet he does his job diligently and conscientiously. Although so many deaths are recorded on a daily basis, apparently due to the ill-equipped nature of the clinic, his medical expertise is never in doubt. He successfully performs a craniotomy on a pregnant woman to Dr. Patkin's delight. His role in conjunction with other researchers in discovering the causes and vaccination for the epidemic is commendable. Besides Drs. Diana and Patkin, other researchers from University of Toro deserve accolade for their significant role in stopping the epidemic. Even if they suffer humiliation from their government, the foreign recognition is pleasing to the ear! Sir Cummings does not mince words in praising them lavishly, calling for a standing ovation in appreciation of their enviable scientific attainment. This foreign recognition has impacted positively on the new government who reinstates them. Perhaps in saner clime, they would have been individually bestowed with a Nobel Prize. Such is the import of their research efforts.

Finally, the fall of the government and the reversal of fortune for its members signal the fate which awaits anyone, no matter how highly placed, who tramples on the collective will of the people. The end of the government is predictable because the interest of the people cannot be forsaken on a permanent basis. No wonder its policies and actions are soon jettisoned and repelled. The reinstatement of the members of Professor Abubakar's research team is enough to signal the inevitability of light at the end of the tunnel.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that the bane of Nigeria's development is largely the unpatriotic misdemeanour of the leaders which was given vent by the active connivance of the people. Whereas several scholars have rebuffed Nigeria's leaders for their retrogressive style of governance, we aver that the criminal silence from the vast majority of the people makes them no less guilty. Fortunately, a ray of hope is found in the core of the academics, professionals and intellectuals who are committed to researches to address the nation's problem.

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