

PROPHETIC VOICES AND MILITARY REGIMES: LITERARY REVIEWS OF NIGERIAN DRAMA AS POLITICAL ALLEGORY (1984–1999)

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive review of Nigerian drama produced during the military regimes of 1984–1999, examining how playwrights employed political allegory as a strategic tool for critiquing authoritarian governance. The study surveys key dramatic works from the period, tracing the evolution from the brutal consolidation of General Buhari's regime to the protracted transition programmes under Generals Babangida and Abacha. Drawing on established scholarship from before 2020, the article argues that the military era forced Nigerian dramatists to develop increasingly sophisticated allegorical modes of expression, creating what Femi Osofisan termed "the theatre of surreptitious insurrection." Through detailed analysis of major playwrights including Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, and Tess Onwueme, alongside significant works such as *Saworoide* and *The Barons*, the study demonstrates how allegory functioned as both artistic choice and survival strategy. The article concludes by assessing the legacy of this dramatic tradition for subsequent Nigerian political discourse, arguing that the allegorical strategies forged under military repression remain foundational to contemporary socially engaged Nigerian theatre.

Keywords: Nigerian drama, political allegory, military regimes, protest literature, postcolonial theatre, Soyinka, Osofisan, satire, authoritarianism

1. Introduction

The period from 1984 to 1999 represents one of the most repressive yet artistically productive phases in Nigerian literary history. Following Major General Muhammadu Buhari's coup that ousted the civilian administration of Shehu Shagari in December 1983, Nigeria entered what would become fifteen years of uninterrupted military rule under successive military administrations, broken only by the failed transition to the short-lived interim government of Ernest Shonekan in 1993 and the subsequent brutal dictatorship of General Sani Abacha. This era witnessed the transformation of Nigerian drama from a post-independence celebratory mode to a deeply critical and allegorical art form, as playwrights sought to navigate increasingly hostile political environments while maintaining their commitment to social critique.

The centrality of drama to Nigerian political discourse has long been recognised. As Adeoti (2003) observes, the military is not only a dominant political force in the country's postcolonial governance but also a recurrent subject in its narrative fiction, poetry and drama. In the works of Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, and Ben Okri, one is confronted with tropes of power abuse, economic mismanagement and poverty among other legacies of military regimes. Adeoti further notes that while soldiers were celebrated initially as messiahs who rescued the polity from corrupt politicians, they became vampires in the 1980s and 1990s after plunging the nation into political turmoil and economic tribulation.

This study focuses specifically on the period 1984–1999, encompassing the full trajectory of military governance that followed the Second Republic's collapse. The year 1984 marks the consolidation of the Buhari regime's authoritarian apparatus, while 1999 saw the formal transition to the Fourth Republic under President Olusegun Obasanjo. Within this framework, the article undertakes a literary review of Nigerian drama as political allegory, examining how playwrights deployed metaphorical, satirical, and symbolic strategies to critique military governance while evading state censorship and repression.

2. Historical Context: The Military Eras (1984–1999)

Understanding the dramatic output of this period requires careful attention to the shifting political landscape that shaped and constrained literary production. The fifteen-year span comprises three distinct phases: the Bukar Sidi (Buhari/Idiagbon) regime (1983–1985), the Ibrahim Babangida administration (1985–1993), and the Sani Abacha dictatorship (1993–1998), followed by the brief transition under Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998–1999).

The Buhari regime, which seized power on 31 December 1983, established a draconian governance framework through Decree No. 2 of 1984, which suspended habeas corpus and allowed for indefinite detention without trial. This was followed by Decree No. 4 of 1984, the notorious "Offensive Publication Decree," which criminalised the publication of any material deemed embarrassing to the government. Although Decree No. 4 was repealed in 1985, its legacy of press suppression permanently altered the relationship between artists and the state. As Osofisan (2016) reflects, during this period Nigerians found themselves faced with the double challenge of inventing a new theatre out of culturally heterogeneous resources, and at the same time, creating a politically committed theatre which would expose the venality of the soldiers without however being suppressed by their censors.

The Babangida regime, which emerged from a palace coup on 27 August 1985, initially presented itself as a more accommodating administration, promising a genuine transition to civilian rule. Babangida's "Structural Adjustment Programme" (SAP) imposed in 1986,

enforced under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, brought devastating economic consequences for ordinary Nigerians while enriching a small cabal of military and civilian contractors. The regime's most infamous act, however, was the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election widely believed to have been won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola. This annulment plunged Nigeria into its most severe political crisis since the Civil War.

The Abacha dictatorship (1993–1998) represented the culmination of military brutality and institutionalised corruption. Upon seizing power, Abacha dissolved all democratic institutions, banned political parties, and unleashed a wave of repression against civil society, the press, and pro-democracy activists. The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists in November 1995 drew international condemnation, while the regime's systematic elimination of perceived opponents, including the murder of Kudirat Abiola and the mysterious death of Chief M.K.O. Abiola in detention, created an atmosphere of pervasive fear. It was under these conditions that Nigerian drama reached its most sophisticated allegorical expression.

3. Political Allegory as a Literary Strategy

The use of allegory by Nigerian dramatists during the military era requires careful theoretical contextualisation. Allegory—the representation of abstract political realities through concrete fictional forms—served multiple functions: it enabled critique of repressive regimes without explicit naming of targets, thereby providing a measure of protection for playwrights and performers; it educated audiences about political realities through familiar cultural frameworks; and it preserved a space for political engagement in an environment where direct criticism was dangerous.

As Bello Sajo (2025) notes, periods of military rule and political turbulence in Nigeria prompted the emergence of protest literature, allegorical narratives, and politically charged poetry, highlighting the relationship between politics and literary creativity. Writers often responded to political repression by adopting indirect methods of communication such as allegory, symbolism, and satire to express dissenting views, enabling them to critique political authorities and societal injustices while avoiding direct confrontation.

The allegorical mode was particularly well-suited to dramatic form. The Yoruba travelling theatre tradition, with its deep roots in folkloric narrative, mythological reference, and communal performance, provided an indigenous framework within which contemporary political comment could be embedded. Playwrights could draw on Orisa mythology, traditional kingship structures, and proverbial wisdom to create layered texts that operated simultaneously as entertainment, cultural preservation, and political subversion.

Tess Onwueme's work exemplifies the sophisticated deployment of allegory for political critique. As Obafemi (1994) observes, in *The Desert Encroaches* (1985) and *Ban Empty Barn* (1986), Onwueme employs allegory as a metaphoric and satiric idiom to handle highly political and committed themes. Both plays explore the dominance of a capitalist social order erected upon the systematic exploitation of the productive sector of society. Obafemi examines how Onwueme uses allegory to make a satirical reference to a materialist view and exploration of an exploitative and oppressive social order in the throes of seminal liberatory struggle. Through highly allegorical characters and their interactions, Onwueme highlights the tension between the "lesser and higher animals," a metaphor for the various social strata in society.

The allegorical strategy was not merely a defensive measure but also an aesthetic choice that enriched Nigerian drama's expressive capabilities. By requiring audiences to decode political references, allegory fostered active engagement with texts and created communities of interpretation that could sustain political consciousness even under conditions of repression. This interactive dimension of allegorical theatre constituted what Osofisan has described as a "theatre of surreptitious insurrection" (Osofisan, 2016).

4. Wole Soyinka and the Satirical Assault on Military Tyranny

No examination of Nigerian drama as political allegory can ignore the towering contribution of Wole Soyinka, Africa's first Nobel laureate in literature (1986). Soyinka's engagement with military governance spans his entire career, but the 1984–1999 period witnessed some of his most ferocious satirical assaults on authoritarian power. Three plays from this period are particularly significant: *A Play of Giants* (1984), *From Zia, With Love* (1992), and *King Baabu* (2001), the latter published just after the period under consideration but whose gestation occurred during the Abacha years.

A Play of Giants, written and published in 1984, draws inspiration from the tyrannical regimes of several African dictators who rose to power through coups and maintained rule via brutality, cult of personality, and economic plunder. The play depicts a gathering of African dictators, with the central character Kamini clearly modelled on Idi Amin of Uganda, but the implications for Nigerian military leadership are unmistakable. As Perera argues, Soyinka gets his "message" across by showing Kamini at his worst; in this way, he is able to demonstrate the consequences of tolerating a tyrant's whims. The play is structured along the lines of Genet's *The Balcony*, focusing on power and on the excesses of power.

Soyinka's satirical strategy in these plays has been analysed extensively. Diala (2022) examines the satirical mechanisms in Soyinka's portraits of military rulers in three later

satires—A Play of Giants, From Zia, With Love, and King Baabu—as complementary to his social activism. Debunking the military-spun myth of soldiers as messiahs in the arena of African/Nigerian politics traduced by the corruption of politicians, Soyinka stages them instead as powerful but intellectually deficient paranoiacs whose delusion of public purpose is in reality an excuse for megalomania and brutality. Foregrounding military authoritarianism as retrogressive and inherently antagonistic to the democratic spirit, the playwright shows how the enduring legacies of military rule continue to undermine the Nigerian incarnation of democracy.

The satirical mechanisms Soyinka employs include grotesque parody, linguistic distortion, and the systematic inversion of military self-justification. Through artistic creativity and deployment of language as an ideological satirical tool, Soyinka presents the pitiable picture of the African socio-political system and the ridiculous image of the leadership in Africa. As revealed in their poor command of the English language, Soyinka mocks postcolonial African leaders as uneducated, immoral, intellectually bankrupt and pathologically deficient despots.

The political courage required for such representation cannot be overstated. Soyinka was a particular target of the Abacha regime, which sentenced him to death in absentia in 1997. Reflecting on this period, Soyinka later noted: "If Abacha succeeded in killing me, he probably wouldn't have killed Ken Saro Wiwa. Abacha and the military people around him wanted to prove a point. They wanted to send shock to Nigerians, to the world. The point they wanted to make was that they can do whatever they want and that there is nothing anyone can do about it" (quoted in Diala, 2022). That Soyinka continued to write and publish allegorical critiques under such circumstances testifies to the power of dramatic art as a weapon of resistance.

5. Femi Osofisan: The Theatre of Surreptitious Insurrection

Femi Osofisan, the most prolific Nigerian playwright of his generation, developed a distinctive theatrical idiom that combined Marxist critique, Yoruba folkloric elements, Brechtian alienation techniques, and a sustained commitment to social transformation. Osofisan's work during the military period is animated by what he has termed "the theatre of surreptitious insurrection"—a mode of performance that operates within and against the repressive apparatus of the state.

In his 2016 reflection on his development as a playwright, Osofisan traces how Nigerian artists, in this post-colonial military state, found themselves faced with the double challenge of inventing a new theatre out of culturally heterogeneous resources, and simultaneously creating a politically committed theatre which would expose the venality of the soldiers without being suppressed by their censors. This dual imperative shaped Osofisan's

dramaturgical choices across such works as *Morountodun* (1979), *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980), and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1991).

Osofisan's allegorical technique operates through multiple registers. At the most obvious level, his plays often transpose contemporary political conflicts into mythical or folkloric settings, thereby creating distancing effects that protect both playwright and audience while permitting sharp political commentary. More subtly, Osofisan's work systematically undermines the ideological justifications of military rule by exposing the class interests that animate authoritarian governance. His characters, drawn from the ranks of the exploited and marginalised, frequently articulate revolutionary consciousness that implicitly condemns the military regime's protection of elite privileges.

The relationship between Osofisan's drama and youth activism during the military period has also received scholarly attention. Even during the worst military dictatorships, Nigerian youth made remarkable sacrifices and contributions to policies and decisions, including protesting against insensitive government actions generally. Osofisan and other dramaturges have recognised and demonstrated in their works the immense potential of young people to positively add value to the issues of social change, including leadership and governance in their immediate communities.

6. Ola Rotimi: Dramatising Leadership and Corruption

Ola Rotimi, whose career spanned the First Republic through the military period, made distinctive contributions to Nigerian political drama through his exploration of leadership, corruption, and the clash between traditional values and modern aspirations. Although Rotimi's most famous works predate 1984—*The Gods Are Not To Blame* (1971), *Kurunmi* (1971), and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974)—his later plays sustained his critical engagement with Nigerian political realities.

The Theme of Democracy in the Drama of Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka examines democracy's treatment across selected works, including Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1979). In this play, Rotimi mocks Nigerian politicians by portraying Major Lejoka-Brown as a fundamentally Nigerian politician, creating a story that serves as a reminder to Nigerians regarding upcoming elections. Lejoka-Brown's trajectory—from soldier to farmer to politician—mirrors the pattern of military officers transitioning to civilian rule that characterised the period, with all the corruption and opportunism such transitions entailed.

Sergeant Ola and his Followers, performed at the Royal Court Theatre in 1979, offers a more direct satire of military ambition. Through a series of comedic and poignant scenes, Rotimi

examines themes of leadership, corruption, and the clash between traditional values and modern aspirations. Sergeant Ola, a charismatic and opportunistic military officer, returns from the battlefield with grand ambitions of political power. The play delves into the absurdity of political ambition and the often corruptible nature of those who seek power.

Rotimi's use of comedy as a vehicle for political critique is particularly significant. By presenting military ambition as absurd and laughable, Rotimi undermines the aura of legitimacy and necessity that military regimes claimed for themselves. The play's tone oscillates between dark humour and critical social commentary, highlighting Rotimi's skill in merging entertainment with profound reflections on societal issues. The characters' interactions and misadventures serve as a microcosm of the larger political dynamics at play in Nigeria during this tumultuous period.

7. Tess Onwueme and Gendered Allegorical Critique

Tess Onwueme, a major female voice in Nigerian drama, brought a distinct perspective to political allegory by foregrounding gender oppression alongside critiques of military authoritarianism. Her work demonstrates how patriarchy and military governance reinforce each other, and how women's resistance to both forms of domination constitutes a revolutionary force.

Onwueme's dramatic works, which are often applauded for their socio-political engagement and commitment to cultural critique, open for scholarly study into the dimensions of her dramaturgy. Through the subtle art of satire laced with revolutionary consciousness, she ridicules the suppressive and exploitative tendencies of the Nigerian system. Her plays are contributions to larger national, African, and Pan African or international discussions of gender, race, history, and politics.

Obafemi's (1994) foundational study of Onwueme's feminist aesthetics focuses on two plays, *The Desert Encroaches* (1985) and *Ban Empty Barn* (1986), where Onwueme employs allegory as a metaphoric and satiric idiom to handle highly political and committed themes. The article examines how Onwueme uses allegory to make a satirical reference to a materialist view and exploration of an exploitative and oppressive social order in the throes of seminal liberatory struggle. The conclusion is that her employment of the allegorical mechanism as a symbolic and metaphoric route to social satirization and dialectical inquiry of contemporary society can have a tremendous impact on the work of female dramatists in Nigeria.

Subsequent scholarship has developed these insights. Onwueme's play *The Desert Encroaches*, through highly allegorical characters and their interactions, highlights the tension

between the lesser and higher animals, a metaphor for the various social strata in the society. 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.

Onwueme's handling of oil politics and military dictatorship in works such as *Then She Said It!* demonstrates how allegory could combine national political critique with international solidarity. "Hungaria" functions as a metaphor for Nigeria, the prominent African nation with the highest concentration of blacks and one of the chief producers of petroleum in the world. Onwueme argues that for any society to be liberated, women must first be released because they have a crucial role in their community's socio-political and cultural transformation.

8. Saworoide and The Barons: Dramatising Military Usurpation

The transition from military to democratic rule in 1999 coincided with the release of two major works of political allegory that retrospectively addressed the military era: Tunde Kelani's film *Saworoide* (1999) and Ahmadu Kurfi's play *The Barons* (1999). These works, emerging at the moment of democratic transition, offered comprehensive allegorical accounts of the preceding fifteen years and helped shape public memory of military governance.

Saworoide (English: *Brass Bells*) was released during Nigeria's democratic transition after military rule, standing as a landmark in Nollywood for its incisive satire on corruption's persistence. The film's allegorical nature aids its political expressiveness. Lapite could easily represent every democratic president Nigeria has had, and Lagata represents the military rulers this country has endured. A classic satire on Nigerian politics condemning the military dictatorship of a king who maintains his position through abuse of power, *Saworoide* is a parable of the drum as the voice of the people.

The narrative unfolds as a displaced royal seeks to reclaim his throne by force, only to unleash a cycle of violence and oppression. Lapite, the king-elect of Jogbo, has decided to enrich himself on ascending the throne, eliminating all opposition by sending hired killers or by harassing them into exile. Protests by the townspeople and farmers are ruthlessly suppressed. In desperation, Lapite seeks military help by engaging the mercenary Lagata, a retired military officer who however kills him and takes over his kingdom. Lagata, who is now determined to become a proper king, imposes an oppressive administration on the people. In the film, Yoruba oral traditions are employed to allegorise the story of Nigeria's socio-political landscape in the 1990s.

Released in 1999, the same year that marked Nigeria's return to democratic rule following a brutal military dictatorship, *Saworoide*'s precise and devastating reading of leadership and

turmoil in the fictional Jogbo community is an obvious allegory for the Nigerian condition. The mercenary usurper falls dead during the installation process, and the people have learnt a bitter lesson: no king will henceforth be allowed to sidestep any correct installation procedure. This conclusion—that democratic processes must be respected if tyranny is to be avoided—constituted a powerful political statement at the moment of Nigeria's democratic rebirth.

Ahmadu Kurfi's *The Barons* similarly reflects on the long period of military rule in Nigeria, which officially began with the end of Shagari's regime in 1983 and ended with the ascent of Obasanjo in 1999. The play gives a satirical account of the clandestine machinations employed behind the scenes by a very powerful group of individuals—the barons, who are mostly from the north of Nigeria—to capture political power and exert influence over the traditional socio-economic and political institutions. The play aims to inform and entertain—to record the events as accurately as possible in a comic manner—and is lent a strong flavour of contemporary politics as real historical events and figures are represented.

9. Thematic Analyses Across the Dramatic Corpus

9.1 Leadership and Its Abuse

The question of leadership—how it is acquired, exercised, and legitimised—dominates the dramatic literature of this period. Nigerian playwrights consistently challenged military claims to political legitimacy, exposing the gap between the rhetoric of patriotic intervention and the reality of self-serving tyranny. Dramatists particularly attacked the military's self-justification as "messiahs" rescuing the nation from corrupt civilian politicians. As Adeoti (2003) notes, the transformation in public perception of soldiers from messiahs to vampires was captured across the literary corpus.

9.2 Corruption and Kleptocracy

The systematic looting of national resources under military governance attracted sustained dramatic treatment. Allegorical representations of corruption ranged from Onwueme's critique of capitalist exploitation in *The Desert Encroaches* to Soyinka's grotesque portraits of dictators whose hunger for wealth knew no bounds. Dramatists showed how military rule institutionalised corruption rather than eliminating it, creating a kleptocratic class that enriched itself at public expense.

9.3 The Fate of the Common Citizen

The lived experience of ordinary Nigerians under military rule—including political repression, economic hardship, and everyday violence—receives extensive treatment in the

dramatic literature. Playwrights from Osofisan to Onwueme centred marginalised voices, giving dramatic representation to farmers, traders, workers, and women whose suffering was systemically produced by military governance. This populist orientation positioned drama as a counter-hegemonic force speaking truth to power on behalf of the oppressed.

9.4 Memory and Testimony

As military rule stretched across two decades, Nigerian drama increasingly engaged with questions of memory, testimony, and historical responsibility. The annulment of the 12 June 1993 election, the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, and the systematic human rights abuses of the Abacha years demanded artistic response. Dramatists responded by incorporating historical events into allegorical frameworks, ensuring that these events would not be forgotten as Nigeria transitioned to democratic governance.

9.5 Gender and Political Oppression

A distinctive contribution of this period's dramatic literature is the sustained attention to gender as a dimension of political oppression. Onwueme's work, alongside that of other female playwrights, demonstrated how military authoritarianism and patriarchy reinforced each other, and how women's resistance to both forms of domination was central to any genuine political transformation. This feminist political critique represented an important development in Nigerian drama's engagement with power.

10. Conclusion: Legacies and Continuing Relevance

The dramatic literature produced during Nigeria's military era (1984–1999) represents one of the most significant bodies of political allegory in postcolonial African letters. Forced by censorship and repression to develop sophisticated indirect modes of critique, Nigerian playwrights created works that operated simultaneously as entertainment, political education, and acts of resistance. The allegorical strategies they forged—deployment of folkloric frameworks, satirical distortion, gendered critique, and the development of what Osofisan termed "the theatre of surreptitious insurrection"—have become foundational to Nigerian socially engaged theatre.

As Adeoti (2003) concluded, Nigerian literature in post-military dispensation will continue to be topical and relevant. Indeed, it has a crucial role to play in the task of nation-building and democratic development necessitated by years of military (mis)rule. The allegorical methods developed under military repression have proven adaptable to subsequent political challenges, including the troubled democratic governance of the Fourth Republic, ongoing struggles against corruption, and the mobilisation of civil society.

Moreover, the dramatic record of military governance constitutes an essential archive for understanding this period of Nigerian history. In the absence of fully functioning democratic institutions and a free press, drama often provided the most comprehensive and truthful account of political realities available to the Nigerian public. Future historians of Nigeria's military era will necessarily engage with this dramatic literature as primary source material for understanding how Nigerians experienced, interpreted, and resisted military governance.

The prophetic voices that emerged during these dark years—Soyinka, Osofisan, Rotimi, Onwueme, and their contemporaries—not only documented tyranny but imagined alternatives to it. Their plays preserved democratic possibility during the most authoritarian periods of military rule, keeping alive the vision of a Nigeria governed by law, accountable to its citizens, and respectful of human dignity. This legacy of political allegory remains urgently relevant for contemporary Nigeria as it continues to negotiate the difficult path toward genuine democracy.

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