

ANATOMY OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE: A STUDY IN JERRY AGADA'S *THE SUCCESSORS*

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Abstract

*Literature is a product of man's imagination with its matrix in human life and circumstances. Literature sheds light on issues that affect man in his environment. The goal is to engender societal transformation. Passion and ideas such as love, kindness, hatred, greed, success, failure, justice, courage, betrayal and many more are concepts that literature normally explore. Jerry Agada is a towering contemporary Nigerian writer whose novel *The Successors* mainly explores the notions of success and failure, critical issues in the life of man and society. This paper highlights the writer's construction of man's prosperity or failure as a confluence or absence of ambition, hard-work, discipline and responsibility in the novel.*

Keywords: *success, failure, ambition, responsibility, discipline, extremism.*

Introduction:

Literary artists contribute in no small measure to the important task of nation building. One of the ways they participate in nation building is capturing in their works, social, economic or political realities in the society, illuminating them, unobtrusively encouraging readers to identify with heroic behaviours and discouraging them from bad behaviours.

The Nigerian society is inundated with challenges, some of which are aridity of ambition, planning, hard-work, discipline and responsibility. The situation has put a lot of people and the society in general in a position distant from prosperity and fulfilment in life. However, it is unassailable that individuals or societies that live with such ideals are normally found in the orbit of greatness. *The successors* captures all this and it can be said that the main agenda of the writer in the novel is the propagation of the values of ambition, hard-work, discipline and responsibility particularly among the youths as a means of achieving personal and societal development. The lives of the principal characters in the novel, Terkura Atsen and Okoh Ameh and their family generations are a metaphor.

Success and Failure:

Agada presents his story in a comparative mode. On one hand, *The Successors* is a moving story of joy and glory of success rooted in ambition, hard-work, discipline and responsibility. On the other hand, it is a moving story of failure and sorrow emanating from poverty of ambition hard-work, discipline and responsibility.

Terkura Atsen and Okoh Ameh are contemporaries who are seemingly placed on the same traffic of life by providence. Both are young secondary school graduates from humble families. They are co-workers and friends at the Provincial Hotel in Makurdi. At Provincial Hotel, Makurdi, both of them have the opportunity of meeting Mr Ezeh, a cosmopolitan Igbo businessman who gives them tales of his business life. Ameh, Okoh's father, arranges marriage for Okoh while Terkura's mother arranges marriage for him. However, the two friends have different personality traits. Terkura Atsen is imbued with ambition, hard-work, discipline and responsibility, all which thrust him to a pedestal of greatness. On the contrary, Okoh is bereft of these elements. Consequently, he is thrown into a life of failure and sorrow.

Because Terkura Atsen is imbued with ambition and entrepreneurial spirit, the tales of Mr. Eze's business life fire his imagination in the world of business. Terkura tells of his dream of owning businesses this way, "I dream of a bigger hotel than this, and also a chain of other business" (p.5). Terkura dreams but does not make dream his master. He knows that his job in the Provincial Hotel cannot take him out of the mass of poor and struggling Nigerians. He understands the encumbrance of the marriage that is being arranged for him by his mother. Equally, he recognizes the fact that further education will expand his chance of development and therefore must seek for it. He takes practical steps to achieve his dream. He rejects the marriage arranged for him. He saves some money while working in the hotel and with this, he enrolls for a higher school certificate after which he secures admission to Ahmadu Bello University to study political science, the scholarship offered him by Northern Nigerian Government gives him a tremendous assistance.

Terkura's road to success is a long one. After graduating from the university and completion of Youth Service, he goes into the world of business. Starting as a buyer and seller of produce, he moves into motorcycle transport business. His variegated concept of business and endless flow of remarkable hard-working spirit takes him to oil and gas distribution, real estate and construction (pp.66-67). He builds a business empire called Tensen Group and emerges as the richest man in his state.

Discipline and responsibility in Terkura resonate in his business transaction with chief Ofega. Indeed, Terkura combines boldness with tact. When chief Ofega throws Terkura's company into a crisis by withholding payment to it as a sub-contractor in the building of

Ojirara and Aliade Residential Quarters in Makurdi, Terkura goes to his house and threatens him in order to collect his money. His threats:

You have treated us unfairly and this is how we`re prepared to go about getting our money. The options, not for us but for you, are these: we will sabotage your business, we shall burn down your warehouse, we shall... (pp.57-58).

Disturbed by the threats, chief Ofega later goes to meet Terkura in the latter`s office. Against his earlier rancorous approach, Terkura, in his office, talks to chief Ofega with surprising equanimity and tact about the predicament of the company. This is how he talks to chief Ofega:

You see the people sitting outside? Half of them are waiting for me to pay them. The bank is also threatening to institute a court case against me. So if you don`t pay our firm, we might as well close these doors and be on way to jail(p.75).

His combative spirit gives way to civility. Terkura knows when to be harsh or polite in order to get what he wants. Chief Ofega pays Terkura and this inaugurates a fresh business friendship between them.

The contract deal between Terkura and chief Ofega exposes to the reader the dynamics of a major aspect of official corruption in the nation. Many Nigerian leaders and rich businessmen are men of dubious grandeur. Massive resources of the state are siphoned by leaders through award of contracts. Those in government give inflated contracts to their cronies who are not actually contractors. Such “contractors” would sub-let the contracts to real contractors at cheap rates. The difference between what the government pays for a contract and what is sublet goes into the pockets of government officers and their cronies. The Military Administrator who awards the building of Ojirara and Aliade Residential Quarters at inflated rate to his friends, Ofega, only for the latter to sublet the contract to the Tensen Group at a cheap rate are classical examples of leaders and “contractors” who collaborate to loot the resources of the state.

Terkura Atsen is cast as a man who rises from a humble background to prosperity and fame by amalgamating ambition, hard-work, discipline and responsibility in his pursuits. His achievements are awesome but tragically, he dies in his sleep at the age of fifty-one without having a son to inherit him.

On the other hand, Okoh Ameh is a classic testimony of lack of vision, courage, ambition, hard-work, discipline and responsibility in man, the result which is failure. He fails to recognize the import of furthering his education on his future life. With his secondary school certificate and his job as a receptionist in Provincial Hotel, he accepts the marriage arranged for him by his father. He is proud as a father of seven children: Ifenne, Agbo, Veronica, Innocent, Emmanuel, Ada and Ene in his seventeen years of marriage with Maria. However, he fails outrageously in his basic family responsibilities. He cannot feed the family properly and the burden falls heavily on his wife whose earning is meager. His children are driven from school on regular basis because he cannot pay their school fees. He does not stay at home to “advise and mould his children for a responsible adult life.” His first son, Ifenne, always out of school, joins the company of Indian hemp smokers. In his admonition to his son when he caught him smoking Indian hemp, Okoh expresses his own contrite:

...If you don't want to end up like me or worse, please and please don't ever smoke Indian hemp again, ever.... Why am I telling you this? It is because I care for you. Look at my life; it is a total waste and I don't want you to follow my footsteps. You have the time to change and make something out of your life. Please, don't ever... (pp:85-86).

Clearly, Okoh is conscious of his failure, but he does not painstakingly take any steps to ameliorate his predicament. Sani (2003: 9) writes;

Problems, difficulties and troubles are inherent part of life. There cannot be life without disappointments and upsets. Odds made life lively. A human life is a phenomenon in constant struggles with odds. Some enormous, some overwhelming. In the midst of upsets, one life could be energized to higher heights. Another could be pressed to perpetually malfunction.

In Okoh's rendezvous with life challenges, he does not develop energy and wisdom to transform them to positive circumstances. For instance, in his financial difficulties, instead of reconnecting and oxygenating his relationship with his old friend, Terkura Atsen who has now become stupendously rich, and seeking for his assistance, he goes into a life of liquor and women, thus, covering his problems with more problems. His

health and economy diminish. His rise to the post of senior supervisor in Provincial Hotel cannot solve his problems. His act of lateness to his work-place earns him a compulsory leave with half salary. He is unable to go to hospital for proper treatment and depends on drugs prescribed to him by chemists. He is faced with accumulated paralyzing challenges. Okoh eventually dies, leaving a legacy of failure and suffering for his family. His miserable life and painful death unleashes intense emotion of pity in the reader.

The writer sustains and foregrounds the motif of ambition, hard-work, discipline and responsibility as the fulcrum of prosperity in the lives of David Atsen, a nephew of late Terkura who inherits the vast Tensen business empire and Ifenne Okoh who battles with his father`s legacy of failure.

On the avenue of success, profligacy and the pursuit of women are acidic. Finding himself in a monumental wealth, David goes into a luxury of lechery and extravagance, and this provokes a depleting effect on the vast business empire his late uncle had toiled to build. His drift to doom is piteously rendered this way:

He had spent money as if the source from which it came was unlimited and would run its course forever, but now he knew that things were different. He was still rich, but liquidity now presented a problem to him. One of the solutions was for him to start selling or mortgaging his inherited assets (p.201).

However, he later changes, starts thinking properly and acting accordingly. He sustains and expands the business empire. He joins the Makurdi Reform Club 1950 in order to become one of those who defines the substance and tone of affairs in the society. He realizes that it is not enough to be rich, one should be politically relevant. Not wanting to be an active partisan politician to the detriment of his business, he infects his friend, Ifenne with the idea of going into partisan politics and supports him. Ifenne emerges as the governor of the state on the platform of Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN) after winning an election.

David`s achievements and departure from promiscuity and profligacy come when he becomes ambitious, hard-working, disciplined and responsible. Many factors influence David to become ambitious, hard-working, disciplined and responsible. Firstly, there is the pull of his “disciplined and puritanical family background” on him. His grand-father, Mr Mathew Atsen was a catechist in the Roman Catholic Mission in Tar-Mbalim. His late uncle, Terkura Atsen, whom he succeeds, was ambition, hard-work, discipline and responsibility personified.

Secondly is David's relationship with Ene Ameh, a responsible girl who becomes his wife. Dolly, one of the numerous women who goes after David because of his money attests the goodness of Ene in the following, "she is a nice girl. I may not be in that category but we do know when we see them. She is your woman; don't let her run away. You're a good guy too..." (p.205).

Ene uses David's love for her, her own subtlety and assertiveness to subvert the latter's life of women and reckless spending. David marries her and settles as a responsible family man.

Thirdly is David's "growing maturity" and discerning mind. These traits manifest in his realization to take steps not only to redeem the Tensen Group from its slide but widen it. It manifests in his recognizing Ene as an ideal woman for matrimony. It manifests in his decision to marry in order to disentangle himself from the entanglement of women. It manifests in his realization that if he really has to be among the shakers and movers of the society, he must not confine himself to business but be involved in politics. It also manifests in his decision not to be directly involved in the struggle for political post. It yet, manifests in his joining Makurdi Reform Club 1950 like his late uncle in order to be connected with a circle of men of power, wealth and influence in the state. As the successor of Terkura Atsen, David's marriage is significant. It is the avoidance of Terkura's erroneous life of extremism. Terkura's desire to amass wealth consumed the space for matrimony in his life thereby dying without a son to inherit his humongous wealth. In our society where fatherhood or motherhood is cherished, Terkura's situation is a great misfortune. Sorrowfully too, his life and death circumstance propelled the belief and story in the society that Terkura:

...had entered into a contractual agreement with the devil, who had agreed to make him rich, under stiff condition that he was not to marry. The devil was also reputed to have apportioned an exact number of years for him to live on earth (p.171).

Now, whether this frightening allegation is true or false, a severe burden of moral failure hangs on Terkura's memory. Here, the writer gives an implicit caveat to readers that man's desire for material prosperity should give reckoning to the principle of moderation or fairness in our affairs. Man should accommodate other values of the society, because the radar of human achievement does not only pick man's acquisition of money and material things but his fulfillment of moral obligations. Marriage is an important moral obligation in the society that Terkura failed to fulfill.

Ifenne is an antithesis of his late father. But like Terkura Atsen, he amalgamates ambition, hard-work, discipline and responsibility in his pursuits. With these, he battles with his father's legacy of failure and becomes a man of means and standing in the society. After the death of his father and the completion of his secondary school education, he becomes a bus conductor to assist the mother in the up keep of the family. Being a bus conductor with Oga Olu, a disciplined, responsible, successful driver and transport business man, Ifenne receives a baptism of hard-work, discipline and responsibility. He saves money to pursue university education after seven years of leaving secondary school. After his university education, he goes into the world of business. He ends up building a transport company and an agro-allied industry from fertilizer import and sale.

Life can be a tortuous path. It can offer paralyzing challenges or painful death to some people. It should not be walked alone. People empower people. Ifenne recognizes the imperative for a struggling man to associate with successful people if he wants to be successful. Unlike his late father who distanced himself from his rich friend, Terkura Atsen, and therefore cannot avail himself of their relationship in his accumulated predicaments that ultimately take his life, Ifenne benefits from his friend, David Atsen, who is richer than him. David lends Ifenne money for the latter's fertilizer business. David therefore "fertilizes" Ifenne's fertilizer business. He also gives Ifenne a tremendous support to become the governor of the state. In his support for Ifenne to become the governor of their state, David invests in the political power of the state. In this scenario, the writer underscores the importance of the principles of net-working, inter-penetration and collaboration that are involved in pursuing prosperity for oneself and the society in general.

Like David who avoids his uncle's erroneous extremism of life, amassing wealth without giving a room for marriage and begetting children, Ifenne avoids his father's extreme lack of ambition, discipline and responsibility that makes him a father without means and standing in the society. Ifenne struggles to become a man of means and standing in the society and also marries.

Conclusion:

The successors is a discourse on the notions of success and failure in human life. Laced with emotive scenarios of pity, joy and anxiety, the novel is philosophical and didactic with a transformation agenda. It is important to sum up the dominant ideals of the narrative. Entrepreneurship is a critical pathway to individual's and societal economic prosperity. Material prosperity of man is the convergence of ambition, hard-work, discipline and responsibility. Another crucial factor in man's success is the ability to establish a formidable bond with the powerful and successful. This means that successful

entrepreneurship depends on one's ability to successfully navigate the business and political waters of his society. On the other hand, failure comes where and when all these are lacking. The quest for wealth, fortune and power is a legitimate and fundamental pursuit in human society but man's life is not a thoroughgoing materialism. His achievement is not limited to the acquisition of material wealth but encompasses the fulfillment of moral obligations in the society. Marriage is an important moral obligation to be fulfilled by man but he should also struggle to be a person of means and standing in his society. In this way, his life and that of his family will be meaningful, thus impacting positively on the society. Suffice it to say that although the physical setting of the novel is mainly Benue State of Nigeria, the writer's perspective is universal, for success and failure and what they take, and respect for moral values are crucial issues in humanity anywhere.

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