

## Book Review: *Snapshots* – A Play By Bode Sowande

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Bode Sowande, *Snapshots: A Play*, Ibadan: Crafted and Bound Wordworks, 2021 (vii & 93 pages). ISBN 978-978-56541-3-4 (hb); 978-978-53146-7-0 (e-book).

Nigeria is a world of paradoxes, of uncertainties and of unparalleled *volte-face* changes in everyday activities along with differing governmental policies which impact the life and livelihood of the common man. Bode Sowande, a Nigerian, in his most recent play, *Snapshots* (2021), captures some definitive aspects of the Nigerian developmental process. It is impossible to be a Nigerian and have a stable life, especially in relation to public and private activities, and the way governance is administered in the country.

In *Snapshots*, Bode Sowande, a veteran Nigerian playwright *par excellence*, deals with the common life of common Nigerians in relation to themselves, their fellow common people and the government (Nigeria in this case, if we put on our symbolic cap). The common man is neither in the general nor specific plans of government (this has been proved and shown over time). The little achievements he attains are ephemeral as the government like a scavenger bird can swoop down anytime and devour, destroy and decimate them based on the whims and caprices of individuals in government through actions referred to as ‘government policies’.

In the comedy, albeit a very serious play, there is the depiction of a part of life that is foundational to how the poor, the common people and the Nigerian proletariat live their lives. Serious issues are reduced sometimes to banalities, to the mundane, and to the spiritual, especially if those concerned cannot access human rights as posited by Serifat, one of the characters in the play. This collapses into one of the reasons Nigerians are statistically and internationally seen as the most religious and happiest people on the surface of the earth. A paradox at the most – it does not reflect what they go through on daily basis and their innermost feelings – only what they hold on to in the face of the harsh and rudderless world that they find themselves.

These snapshots, these snippets, these comical but dangerous series in the lives of the poor are portrayed through the eyes and life of Baba Gentle. He has an old house with a C of O (a Certificate of Occupancy – from the government which legalizes the building and its siting). Here, his family lives with vagrants, whom he has taken in and who sleeps on the veranda but pays for their accommodation. It is plain that though they are poor, they abhor certain behaviours like stealing, cheating, killing, etc. which are prevalent in other social statuses of the Nigerian life: a sort of honour among thieves.

It is this house that is in contention: its proposed and hinted demolition by the government and the effect(s) this might or will have on its occupants (a representation of all the houses in the ghetto). The problem is to provide situation(s) and solutions(s), and stop its destruction. And

these came in comic forms: the capturing and drugging of the bulldozer driver and the provision of the favela solution.

Apart from the above, there are subplots and characterization that energize the work and its focus: the actions of Have Gun – the epitome of the gun carrying ghetto thugs; Mama Gaga – the madame with a coterie of young prostitutes mildly referred to as ladies and girls and who tries to create another Big Brother Africa show through her Big Sister TV Reality show; Serifat – a believer in the Nigerian nation that she thought should have come of age with her citizens claiming human rights privileges; Honorable When Able – the politician and government representative who wallows in self-ego and selfishness; Brother Agba – the well-to-do socio-political connector; and Government Official – who is so bureaucratic that he cannot think above the ordinary, mundane level. It is a potpourri of a verisimilitude Nigerian socio-political and ghetto life.

It is a play of a day on a Saturday filled with activities hinged on the destruction of the lives of those involved. And the morning was introduced by the stealing case where Baba Gentle asks rhetorically: “What kind of omen is this? Good or bad” (11) And the answer comes in varied forms: comic, heartbreaking, problematic, serious argumentations and finally, a solution. It is a straightforward play without a pause, stop or division. The storyline is not divided into either the traditional Acts and Scenes or the modern Movements. The major control over the play are directions given the Director and the Set Designer by the Playwright.

The language of the work is simple and straightforward. It is a mixture of English and Yoruba languages. The use of the English Language extends to the Nigeria variation and the Nigerian Pidgin. The Yoruba Language domiciles the characters and the play in the South West of Nigeria. It is used by all social classes represented in the text: Government Official, Brother Agba, Have Gun, Iya Seri, etc. The use of language reflects successfully the types of characters, their social placements, and the general foci of the work.

The play has songs from both the real Nigerian world and the creative mind of the playwright. There is Juju music sung by the popular Nigerian musician, Sunny Ade (68). There is also Fuji music (36-38) (another music genre on the Nigerian musical scene). They are about improving the lives of the people from the ghetto and Nigerian people in general. There are the general ones (79-81), danceable, making the play light and giving dignity to the ghetto people.

As pointed earlier, the work is Nigerian in orientation and, therefore, the themes would be Nigerian focused. The work is a compilation of different snapshots – different actions of and representations of the poor’s lives, government’s lackadaisical attitude to the people’s struggle to be free of poverty, comparison of the past and present national events – the portrayal that government and her officials do not think as they allow events to repeat themselves – the destruction of Maroko (in reality) and Araromi (in the play), the care and love of the proletariat for themselves – the ‘we’ and ‘them’ political dichotomy, the Mama Gaga’s Television Reality show producing the Big Sister Araromi TV Reality show (the capturing and depiction of the everyday reality life of poverty-condemned Nigerians as compared to the real and popular Big Brother African reality show that makes participants popular and rich), etc. These themes, as

varied as they are, are symptomatic of the assumed developing but static Nigerian world in respect of her socio-economic, political, welfarist, and developmental policies.

A Nigerian, like Bode Sowande, would know how to characterise Nigerians as symbolic markers in a play such as this that replicates the Nigerian world. Baba Gentle is not only gentle, he is considerate, believing in the Nigerian dream that his C of O will stand for him in the face of the destructive onslaught on his house. Iya Seri is the quintessential Nigerian housewife who lives for her husband and will stand by him, taking his problems as hers unless something volcanic happens. Brother Agba is the suave gentleman who has moved out of the ghetto world but cannot forget “alajobi” – the family link, the communal responsibility that must be borne by all (especially the first born). His wealth does not ostracise him though he is referred to as *Baba Victoria Island* – a place totally opposite the ghetto of Araromi in all parameters of life. There is Mama Gaga – the TV reality show producer and the supplier of ‘girls’ with presentable nomenclatures like ‘party ushers’, ‘protocol girls’, and ‘waitresses’. Her dream, which tallies with that of the playwright, is to showcase, publicly and permanently, the reality of the life of the Nigerian poor. The hope of these two is that there would be change as propounded by Honourable When Able. As a political character and a depiction of the Nigerian political class, Honourable When Able’s proposal is to apply the Favela solution to the ghetto problem. According to him,

Yes, the favela solution. We turn the ghetto to tourist destination after their cultural and hygiene rehabilitation. We rehabilitate their habitat. (89)

He and Brother Agba have a precedence in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

There is a beautiful touch of domiciliation and reality. The play not only brings on board the names of Nigerians, dead and alive, but it also showcases and applies what they were and are known for to ongoing textual situations. Amongst others, there are Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Joe Okei Odumakin and Femi Falana – all known human rights activists. What the playwright preaches through them is the need for people at different levels of governance in Nigeria to listen more to their citizens and respect their rights.

This work comes out at the right time in the life of the Nigerian nation. The poor man has been poor since independence; he has been taken for granted by his political leaders; his rights have been “wronged” and no one cares. Over the decades, his problems have become snapshots that have been recorded and examined over and over without much change as he remains in the world of pictures to the governments, policy makers and implementers. Governments, overtime, continue to repeat the same policies while applying the same solutions that do not solve the inherent problems. The play is a wakeup call for government and all those involved in the welfare of the poor to watch Mama Gaga’s Big Sister Araromi TV Reality show – see the real life of the poor and effect the required change.

**Note:**

\*This book review was presented at the book launch of Prof Bode Sowande’s *Snapshots* and *The Spellbinder* at Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo on the 23rd of February, 2021.

