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# Background of poet

# Tayo Olafioye was born in 1948. He is a poet, novelist and scholar, active in Nigeria and the United States. He has won several prizes for his works and has published over twenty books in the span of four decades. He attended various tertiary institutions; both home and abroad. *A Parliament of Idiots* dates back to 2002 and is one of his most recent collections of poetry of which “Minimum Wage: Maximum Wahala” is under. He died in 2012.

# An inspection of Tayo Olafioye’s work suggests that he focused his attention towards addressing the yearnings and concerns of the oppressed. “Minimum Wage: Maximum Wahala,” follows this tide and is a poem that laments the plundering of national commonwealth.

# Background of the poem/ analysis

# “Minimum Wage: Maximum Wahala” is written as a reaction by the decision of the federal government of Nigeria to declare N7000 as the official minimum wage of Nigerian workers. At first this seemed as a serious benefit to the workers turned to a major disadvantage. The cost of living became increasingly expensive and objections to the change of the minimum wage were rejected.

# The poet expresses the continuous anguish of the masses that he refers to as “Songhai labourers” (line 1), particularly caused by the refusal of the elected politicians to pay the N7000 minimum wage:

# *“Reined in by those they chose*

*To lift them.*

*No greater enemy*

*Than the one, in one’s household*

*The python with which one sleeps*

*At night on the same bed” (line 6-10)*

The poet compares politicians to pythons who devours its prey (the masses) to satisfy their hunger or in this case greed. The very leaders that were chosen to direct the masses are the ones pushing them into poverty. The

*“7000 naira wages,*

*slashed to the bone*

*Before the cock crows” (line 12-14)*

Lampoons the callousness in the inability of government to pay the N7000 minimum wage to the workers but have enough to embezzle which is an allusion to the current N18000 minimum wage that most governors at the time refused to pay. Since the senators are mostly former governors, the poet labels them as “law making bandits” because they steal what should be evenly distributed as he puts in the line below:

*“Bales of ‘#’\* notes*

*Carried by midnight owls*

*Made pregnant the garments they wear” (line 21-23)*

“Owl” is a bird which is active at night because of its thieving lifestyle. So, the poet refers to the senators as “owl” because they steal public funds and hide them in their garment which has today taken another dimension as such money are hidden in unthinkable places like a septic tank, untraceable accounts abroad, water storage tank and buried beneath their enormous houses.

The general effects of the heinous actions of politicians on the masses whom he calls mekunnus and the poor whom he calls talakawas such as poverty, famine, hopelessness and eating what Tayo Olafioye calls “unhappiness” instead of dinner are expressed in the lines below:

*Strikes today, famine tomorrow*

*The mekunnus are dying*

*Talakawas eye the moon for delivery (line 29-31)*

Regardless of the attitude and actions of those in government, the masses are urged to remember that they hold the true power as they can decide which individual takes the power. Tayo Olafioye cautions the masses to be careful of those they put into power that:

*The virus that decimates a plant*

*Lives amidst its leaves (lines 41 -42).*

Nigeria is an independent nation, hence the times where inadequacies on the part of the government were blamed on the colonial government are gone.

**THEMES**

1. The insufficiency of the Nigerian minimum wage:

From the title of the poem “Minimum Wage: Maximum Wahala”, it can be concurred that the minimum wage in Nigeria is a serious issue. The minimum wage proves to bring “maximum wahala”, meaning “maximum trouble” as it is too little to finance the cost of living of the average citizen.

1. Uneven distribution of wealth and power in the society:

“Minimum Wage: Maximum Wahala” highlights the gap between the rich and the poor in the Nigerian society. It reveals that while those in the working class are suffering in their “crypt of misery” (line 3), the rich live a very luxurious life as “the black gold lubricates their fingers” (line19). The leaders who are “the kingfishers of pain” (line 17)”, “law making bandits”, “those accorded titles of dignity” (line 26) attain their wealth by “perverting the will of the polity” (line 26) and reining their citizens into a “crypt of misery” (line 3). The underclass, referred to as the “mekunnus” and the “talakawas” in the poem (lines 30 and 31).

1. Insensitivity of Nigerian leaders:

The insensitivity of leaders is addressed in the poem. The leaders exploit their subordinates for their selfish gains, never minding that their actions cause their subordinates to be thrown into abject poverty. As the poet puts it:

*7000 naira\* wages, slashed to the bone*

*Before the cock crows*

*Their fish head dillied and dallied*

*What do they care?*

*The kingfishers of pains.*

*Their own mint outside the pail*

*The black gold lubricates*

*Their fingers (line 12-20)*

The leaders are not the least bit concerned of their subordinates, as long as they the leaders keep enjoying the public funds. Public funds that can either be used to develop social amenities and infrastructure or increase the minimum wage of the working Nigerian are embezzled by those in power, “the law making bandits”. The poet comments: *only marauders maim without care (line 38).*

**POETIC DEVICES**

1. Symbolism:

“Songhai labourers” (line 1) which symbolizes the entire working class in Nigeria, “crypt of misery” meaning poverty, “python”, “midnight owl”, “law making bandits” and “virus” referring to politicians, “black gold” referring to public funds majorly gotten from the sale of crude oil, “mekunnus” and “talakawas” meaning the common citizens, “the moon” meaning religious entities.

1. Enjambment (or Run-on-line):

This is a continuation of thought and structure of a poetic sentence from one line to the next without a pause. This is seen in:

*“Songhai labourers:*

*Will never climb*

*Out of the crypt of misery*

*Dank all lifelong” (line 1-4)*

1. Irony:

*“Songhai labourers…They are cursed*

*Reined in by those they chose*

*To lift them” (line 1…5-7)*

It is truly ironic that those who the labourers chose to lift them are reining them into a crypt of misery as seen in the lines above.