

# Dramatic Art, Medical Ethics and Rehabilitation: Patient-Centred Therapeutic Relationship in Omobowale's *The President's Physician*

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**Abstract:** Literature, over the years, has become a potent instrument in humanizing medical practice, which manifests in different forms. Scholars in the domains of literature and medicine have identified the significance of literary knowledge in clinical or medical experiences. From consultation, diagnoses and treatments, humanistic tools constitute the hallmarks of medical practice, which are evident in the therapeutic relationship that involves the patient and care-giver. Literary writers, the world over, have consciously or unconsciously created human health awareness by representing medical episodes and therapeutics as central themes; in such texts, biomedical experiences like illnesses, diseases and ethical issues of medicine are foregrounded. A significant layer of literature and medicine is the exploration of ethical standards in the medical profession, where characterization and dialogues are used to emphasize physician-patient relationship in the therapeutic process. In Nigeria, where medical practice is predominantly doctor-centered, one encounters how physicians and healthcare professionals consistently contravene the Hippocratic Oath, the official and/or sacred document that contains the ethics of medicine. This article examines the appropriation of the patient-centered therapeutic relationship in Emmanuel Babatunde Omobowale's play, *The President's Physician*, highlighting the import of medical ethics in the rehabilitative process. The play is given a close-reading and subjected to qualitative, literary analysis, identifying patient-centered ethical principles like non-maleficence, patient autonomy, beneficence and justice that should form the bedrock of medical practice. Omobowale, in his play, explores the need for medical doctors and other healthcare givers to provide care that is respectful of, and responsive to the preferences of their patients. The analysis is anchored on Stephen Kekeghe's Pathotextualism which underscores the interplay of illness or disease (pathos) and text (literature).

**Keywords:** Medical Ethics, Literature and Medicine, Nigerian Drama and Rehabilitation

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## 1. Introduction

The art and humanities have been constantly deployed in creating awareness on the ethics of medicine and other domains of human health experiences, which is aimed at enforcing a humanistic, therapeutic relationship between the caregiver and the patient. This implies that the humanistic culture has been very significant in facilitating effective and efficient medical practice and recuperation. The interplay of the art and medical practice is evidently explored in Omobowale's play, *The President's Physician* [1]. The potency of the art in promoting rehabilitation or therapeutics

is traceable to classical time. Apollo, one of the Olympian deities in Greek mythology, is the god of music, poetry and healing, which underscores a symbiotic relationship between medicine and the art. Also, the Greek philosopher, Hippocrates, is also a physician; he developed different theoretical standpoints that formed the bedrock of modern medical practice. This is why he is acclaimed as the father of medicine.

Since the formal institutionalization of Literature and Medicine by Joanne Trautmann Banks in 1972, there have been appreciable efforts on the use of literary and other humanistic tools in facilitating healthcare and healing process

[2]. As the first scholar with a Ph.D in Literature to head medical school in the US, Trautmann-Banks introduced literary approaches to medical education, leading to positive, dramatic changes in medical education in the US and other parts of the world. Oyeboode admits that literature and the humanities play a significant role in medical education, especially in Europe and North America [3]. In another study, Oyeboode reveals that the incorporation of literature in medical education is to improve on the physician-patient relationship in the therapeutic and rehabilitative process [4]. This motivation to include the humanities in biomedical education and practice was informed by the autocratic and uncompassionate disposition of a large number of physicians and care-givers, engendering poor therapeutic relationships.

The introduction of literary and humanistic tools to medical practice humanizes significantly, the medical profession by building a more empathic and efficient healthcare professionals. This is why Evans notes that literature helps to stimulate a humanistic approach to physician-patient relationship [5]. The empathy and humanism that is the hallmark of literary practice is significant in reshaping the medical profession to uphold love and value for human lives. On this note, Omobowale states that literature "assists in making medicine a more people-oriented and outward looking profession" [6]. Faith McLellan adds that the reading and writing of creative works build humane and compassionate physicians who take human emotions seriously in the medicalization process [7].

In Nigeria, some studies have also foregrounded the psychotherapeutic import of literature to patients. Sola Owonibi examines the psychosocial benefits of autobiographical narratives to terminally ill patients [8]. Stephen Kekeghe reveals the role of literature in creating awareness on mental health situations and challenges [9, 10]. Beyond creating awareness on the manifestation of mental episodes, literature, especially poetry, plays a significant role in letting out pent-up emotion, leading to mental invigoration [11]. It is observed that beyond the earliest studies of Omobowale [12, 13], critical works on the role of literature in conveying medical ethics in rehabilitating the patient, have not been given adequate attention. The current study, therefore, examines Omobowale's exploration of medical ethics and patient-doctor therapeutic relationship in his play, *The President's Physician*. The study reveals that one way through which literature facilitates rehabilitation and healing is the exploration of the Hippocratic ethics of medicine, which is demonstrated through socially convincing dialogues and characterization in Omobowale's play under study.

Rehabilitation is a subspecialty of medicine that deals on the restoration of functional and quality life to patients who suffer from difficulties or disabilities. Rehabilitation is evident in both physiatry (physical medicine) and psychiatry (mental health). A rehabilitative condition (physical or mental), has no known permanent cure; as a result, the main objective of the physician is to help the patients function optimally within the limitations placed upon them by the disabling impairment or disease [14]. In Omobowale's play,

*The President's Physician*, the patient suffers from hypochondria, which underscores a number of real and imagined diseases ravaging his body. The duty of his personal physician is not to bring total cure to his health conditions, but to keep him healthy and active. This, therefore, is discussed as a rehabilitative strategy. The Hippocratic ethics of medicine are highlighted in the play to create a patient-centered approach to healthcare, including physical and psychiatric medicine.

The Hippocratic Oath is the earliest expression of medical ethics in the western world, propounded by Hippocrates, the Greek physician and father of medicine. It is a vow made by new physicians during their induction into the medical profession, and it clearly defines a patient-centred approach to medical practice. As a tradition in medical practice, new physicians are required to swear by some perceived 'healing gods' to maintain the specific ethical standards of the medical profession [15]. Originally written in Latin, the Hippocratic Oath is one of the collections that make up the *Hippocratic Corpus*; and it highlights some paramount medical ethics which are very useful in 21<sup>st</sup> century medical profession. There are several English versions of the oath, which are utilized in today's healthcare profession. An excerpt from W. H. S. Jones' translation of the oath reads:

*I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrongdoing. Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course. Similarly, I will not give a woman a pessary to cause abortion. But I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art. I will not use the knife, not even verily, on sufferers from stone, but will give place to such as are craftsmen therein...*

*Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrongdoing and harm, especially, from abusing the bodies of man and woman, bond or free. And whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession, ...if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secret [16].*

The Hippocratic Oath, therefore, contains a range of medical ethics that are sworn to be upheld by fresh medical practitioners, as the ethical standards that must be maintained in healthcare profession. Medical ethics is used to refer to a system of moral principles that add values to the business of clinical medicine [17-19]. As stated above, this article examines the representation of the Hippocratic ethics of medicine in Emmanuel Babatunde Omobowale's play, *The President's Physician*. This dramatic recreation of medical ethics, to foreground the patient-doctor relationship in the therapeutic process, is aimed at humanizing physicians when faced with the business of care-giving. Some of the common ethics of medicine like confidentiality, non-maleficence, autonomy of patients, beneficence and justice are foregrounded in the play. As we shall learn from the play, the oath poses a positive implication on the psyches of physicians when they are faced with ethical dilemma.

The analysis is guided by Pathotextualism, an approach propounded by Stephen Kekeghe [20]. Kekeghe argues that

since 'patho' depicts illness and disease, which is the domain of medicine, and 'text' is an artistic work— written or oral— which is the primary objective of the literary vocation, the combination of the two terms, foregrounds the synergy between medicine and literature. In this study, it is evident that the Pathotextual approach is suitable for a close reading of the clinical issues explored in Omobowale's play under study.

## 2. Textual Analysis and Discussion

Omobowale's *The President's Physician* centers on the character of Doctor Bituki Warunga, a personal physician to a fictional African dictator, General Kalunga Ntibantunganyah, a hypochondriac patient that needs regular healthcare to stay alive. Though there is no permanent cure to his condition, he needs a personal physician that will rehabilitate his mental and physical abnormalities any time the surface. Bituki Warunga finds himself in an ethical dilemma, as he ruminates on whether to kill or save the life of his autocratic and eccentric boss in order to set the Wavarians free from his inhuman rule. Using the principles of medical ethics, as propounded by Hippocrates, as the basis of his ruminations, Warunga acknowledges that it would be unethical for him to exterminate General Kalunga Ntibantunganyah, on account of his draconian rule, since his duty as the president's physician, is to ensure that the president continues to stay healthy to discharge his official functions. The play is anchored on the core tenets of medical ethics, which are: non-maleficence, beneficence, patient autonomy, physician competence and responsible use of power, which are deployed by Omobowale to depict a patient-centred approach in medical practice. In this play, Omobowale highlights the moral significance of the Hippocratic Oath in moderating the activities of medical practitioners.

Through the manifestations of Dr Bituki in the play, as evident in his conducts and utterances, we learn that the tenets embedded in the Hippocratic Oath help to moderate the activities of medical practitioners. This moral guide, with its sacred nature, is very significant in facilitating professionalism where a physician may have been constrained to violate the principles of the medical vocation in the therapeutic process. Given the fact that medicine, as a discipline, deals with human health situations, it is imperative to engage in a form of oath that is sacredly binding on healthcare givers. This is supposed to foster a psychosocial import, especially, as it helps to humanize physicians and clinicians. For instance, we learn from the play that Bituki's father, Miguel, who breached the oath, lives with a fierce sense of guilt and mental torture.

The struggle to maintain the principle of non-maleficence highlights the ethical dilemma faced by Dr Bituki, as a personal physician of General Kalunga Ntibantunganyah, the Executive President and Dictator of Wavaria, who, given the ethics of the medical vocation, Bituki swore to keep healthy. General Ntibantunganyah's despotism and constant

dehumanization of the citizens of Wavaria is evident throughout the play. Though Bituki, like other Wavarians, wishes the president removed from office or dead, so as to end the reign of terror, he is restrained by the ethical standards of the medical profession, especially, the principle of non-maleficence, which requires his total commitment to ensure the safety of the president, his patient. This is a principle that should guide physicians who are faced with the task of rehabilitating patients with severe physical and mental impairments or disabilities. In rehabilitative medicine, for instance, the psychiatrist, who is guided by the ethics of non-maleficence and beneficence, ensures that his or her severely disabled patient is kept alive. No matter the severity of such health condition or the attitude of the patient, it is the obligation of the physician to ensure that the patient is kept alive and healthy.

The concept of non-maleficence is captured in the Hippocratic Oath, which includes the promise 'to abstain from doing harm' to the patient [18]. This ethical issue of medicine expresses the need for the physician to do solely good to the patient— it humanizes physicians as it reminds them of the possible harm which their actions may trigger. This is why it is invoked when a physician is debating the use of an intervention that portends obvious risk of harm, with an absence of benefits to the patient. Given the frustration that the physician may encounter in rehabilitating or treating patients of terminal conditions and impairments, the principle of non-maleficence is crucial to build the physician's empathy and professionalism. Ntibantunganyah suffers from hypochondria and several other terminal conditions. He, therefore, engages Bituki Warunga as his personal physician to constantly rehabilitate him. Bituki reveals:

*Ntibantunganyah is a hypochondriac who suffers from a mixture of reveal and imagined diseases, which has necessitated my ubiquitous presence by his side everyday and every night. He would have died a long time ago if it were not for my meticulous attention to his medical needs (15-16).*

*I am obliged to live in this accursed house for a single reason, to provide His Excellency medical attention to avert his untimely death, which can be caused by one of the many deadly ailments plaguing body (15).*

For instance, despite the inhumanity manifested by Ntibantunganyah to the people of Wavaria, Bituki could not do any harm to him even when he had the opportunity as the president's personal physician. Each time he makes an attempt to exterminate the president, his actions are moderated by the knowledge of the Hippocratic Oath, which he swore during his induction, to show total submission for the wellbeing of his patients. This ethical dilemma is conveyed in the excerpt below:

*Bituki: ... Now, this is my chance to set Wavarians free from Ntibantunganyah's misrule. I administer his daily medication at this time of the day. I shall give him the wrong drugs, together with this poison and his death will be swift and a sweet relief to Wavarians. [He brings out the vial containing the poison and pauses for a while]. But*

*is it right for me to do this? Ntibantungayah is my patient. Do I have the right to kill him even if he is a murderer? I am a medical doctor, I am to save lives not destroy them. The Hippocratic Oath and every other ethic of my profession forbids me from killing him (p. 70. Emphasis: mine).*

The ethics of non-maleficence reveals that the physician is to be committed to the health of his or her patient, even if the patient is an enemy. Through Dr Bituki's utterances and conducts, we are made to understand that he is upset by the cruelty manifested by General Ntibantungayah but as the president's physician, he finds it unethical to hurt him. The following excerpt greatly attests:

*Bituki: ... My profession, medicine, has forced me all this while to be responsible to you, to ensure your safety. But now, I think that I have had enough of you. [Brings out a gun]. Today, you shall die.*

*Ntibantungayah: Please do not shoot me. You are my medical doctor and I recruited you as my personal physician to take care of me. I do not want to die. You are my physician you owe it to me, on the basis of the oath you swore during your induction, to protect me, even if you hate me (p. 38).*

The episodes in Dr Bituki's dream, as conveyed in the dialogue above, reflect his rummaging thoughts. Bituki, obviously, is torn between exterminating and securing the life of Ntibantungayah, his despotic boss. The experiences in the dream are used to foreground his dilemma, which is engendered by his quest to uphold the tenets of the Hippocratic Oath, the sacred document of the medical profession that he swore to defend during his induction. In other words, Bituki's dream is a replay of the conflicts that lie buried in his mind as he struggles between sustaining the ethics of his profession and breaching it to do, paradoxically, the will of Wavarians. The rage which Bituki expressed towards the president in the dream is a reflection of his inward—the dialogue conveys Bituki's inner conflicts as he struggles to sustain the ethics of his vocation.

Wavarians, including Bituki's father, Miguel, who are upset by Ntibantungayah's cruel reign, hope that Bituki, being the president's personal physician, would set Wavarians free by poisoning the president. General Ntibantungayah's vindictiveness is evident in his relationship with other characters in the play. His execution of Major Akubor, the selfless and humane soldier, who criticizes his draconian rule and other threads of heartless assassinations, attest to the president's manifestation of brazen bestiality. According to Akubor, 'About a dozen of innocent soldiers, who voted against Ntibantungayah's decision to continue to rule were arrested and incarcerated' (22). The assassination of the twelve soldiers and other civilians reveal the brutality of the president and the unhealthy nature of his government. It is this injustice that Akubor swore to fight. Sadly, he was murdered by the president, who resents every form of criticism. As a result of the inhumanity and brazen disregard for the masses of Wavaria, Bituki's father, Miguel, a former practicing medical doctor, urges Bituki to break the

Hippocratic Oath by poisoning Ntibantungayah. Miguel, however, acknowledges the fact that it is a difficult task for a physician to kill a patient, whose life s/he had sworn to protect. Miguel explains:

*Bituki, ... I quite understand your position regarding the services you render to Ntibantungayah. As a onetime medical practitioner and a caring doctor, I have felt the same way too. Our profession requires that we should be concerned about the lives of others and the Hippocratic Oath must be truthfully and fantastically adhered to... (41).*

It is not surprising that Bituki, in spite of the dehumanizing manifestations of General Ntibantungayah, serves him diligently. He is torn between adhering to the tenets of the Hippocratic Oath of medicine and the wishes of Wavarians, who crave for the extermination of the reigning tyrant. Miguel, observing the inner conflicts faced by his son, adds: 'I once had to grapple with an ethical dilemma too' (41). Though Miguel recognizes Bituki's medical competence by strictly upholding the ethics of the profession, he prompts him to break the ethics of non-maleficence, by killing Ntibantungayah. Miguel goes on and on to narrate how he once poisoned his patient, a serial killer; but adds that the experience leaves a lasting trouble on his mind because it is unethical for a healthcare giver to kill a patient that needs his help. Miguel narrates:

*Miguel: About two decades ago, I was practicing in Raguna as a psychiatrist. I found out later that one of my consistent patients, who usually settled his bills on time was a serial killer. He would come to my clinic, discuss his sexual fantasies with me and then go out to murder innocent young girls. My knowledge of his dastardly acts unsettled me for quite a while. I did not want to divulge the contents of his case to the police. At that time, I felt that it was unethical... After sometime, I did what I felt was in the best interest of the people of Raguna. I poisoned him. (41-42).*

Miguel's patient, as revealed in his narrative, needs intense mental rehabilitation to come to terms with reality. Realizing that it is unethical to have killed his own patient, Miguel further laments: 'I felt guilty about my past, that I had done something wrong, that I had committed an unpardonable sin by poisoning my patient, the serial killer' (p. 23). This feeling of guilt, manifested by Miguel, is triggered by his consciousness of the tenets of the Hippocratic Oath, which he swore to uphold as a physician. The oath, with its pseudo sacred undertone, moderates the psycho-moral disposition of medical practitioners once they are faced with ethical dilemma.

Though Ntibantungayah is murdered through a coup at the end of the play, Bituki is happy that he does not have a hand in his death: 'Now, I cherish the ethics of my profession as well as my conscience very dearly, as they both prevented me from poisoning Ntibantungayah that fateful afternoon' (74). While Bituki may be happy that Ntibantungayah is dead and Wavarians are freed from his reign of terror, he is simply happy that he did not break the Hippocratic Oath of medicine, by poisoning the president.

The ethics of the autonomy of patients is also explored in Omobowale's *The President's Physician*. In the Hippocratic Oath, it is stated clearly, that a patient has the right to treatment—the patient has the right to refuse or choose the kind of treatments he or she wants [21]. Omobowale interrogates the unethical manifestations of some physicians and healthcare givers, who handle patients autocratically, and sometimes, inhumanly. In the play, the first lady gives an instruction to reduce the multiple births in Acampehi village through abortion. The rights of the pregnant women were not sought—it was a forced abortion, engendered by the supremacist decree of the president and the first lady. Bituki, who recognizes the medical principle of respect for patients' autonomy, laments this breach of the Hippocratic Oath of the medical profession:

*A couple of weeks later, under the instructions of the First Lady and patient, I had come to Acampehi to do some preliminary investigation about the multiple births phenomena in the village. I had taken blood samples of pregnant women at the local maternity hospital without the consent of the women, their husbands or Kajolah and his chiefs. I was angry with myself because I knew what I was doing was ethically wrong but there was nothing I could do about it (59).*

In his letter of apology to the people of Acampehi, through Chief Kojolah, Bituki reveals that his perceived loyalty to the president is what saves him: 'I am unreasonably compelled to do things, which I naturally detest' (59). Another breach of the autonomy of the patient is the forced abortion carried out on the president's numerous girlfriends by the team of doctors at the Presidential Mansion Clinic, where Dr Bituki is a Chief Medical Director. The abortions, according to Bituki, were not voluntary:

*In the presidential Mansion Clinic, where I was the Chief Medical Director, I was aware that some of the younger doctors were performing illegal abortions on some of the president's numerous girlfriends. These abortions were not voluntary and so the wishes of some of these ladies to retain their pregnancies were not respected at all (67).*

Bituki's constant pondering on unethical indulgences of medical practitioners, including, himself, helps reveal his struggle to maintain the moral principles of the medical vocation. Again, he expresses his revulsion over the violations of his professional ethics, of which he is an accomplice: 'My whole being, was gradually being drawn into a vicious cycle of destruction. I detested what I was doing but I had no choice but to do the will of the president' (67). Among other unethical manifestations, the forced abortions which left terrible harms on some of the ladies, many of whom were University undergraduates, bother Bituki.

Also, Eve, the president's only daughter, was forced based on the selfish order of the president, to confine her to a mental asylum, in the Wavarian National Psychiatric Hospital. Her wish to remain in the presidential palace was not respected. The suffocating and choking atmosphere of the psychiatric institution worsened her condition and she

eventually commits suicide. Bituki laments his infringement on the rights of his patient based on his fear of the president:

*The president forced me to recommend that Eve should be committed into a psychiatric institution. [...] Eve also tried to resist her father's directive, but Ntibantungayah insisted she must be sent to the Wavarian National Psychiatric Hospital for an evaluation of her mental state. Her health deteriorated quickly and she progressively became mad, before she eventually committed suicide (66).*

The ethics of beneficence is also featured in Omobowale's *The President's Physician*. Beneficence requires that a medical procedure should be provided for the overall health benefits of the patient, who is the most important person in the therapeutic relationship. It is this moral principle that guides Dr Bituki's relationship with Ntibantungayah in the play. In the play, for instance, Bitukigives meticulous attention to the terminal illnesses of Ntibantungayah, 'a hypochondriac who suffers from a mixture of revealed and imagined diseases' (15), in order to keep him alive through constant rehabilitation. Bituki notes that he works diligently as the president's personal physician, to avert his untimely death "which can be caused by one of the many deadly ailments plaguing his body" (15). This implies that his effort is channeled towards the physical and mental benefits of his patient, the president of Wavaria.

The interrogation of justice is another ethics of medicine that is shown in the play. Justice, as a medical principle, has to do with the distribution of scarce health resources and the decision of who gets what treatment. Bituki's sister, Pikita, laments the inadequacy of competent medical practitioners like Bituki in Wavaria, whereas Bituki is caged by one despotic president who does not care about the wellbeing of the people. She says:

*You are a medical doctor, a surgeon, but those who really need you, the poor, suffering masses of this country do not have access to you, all because of this miserable creature, who calls himself the president (18).*

The excerpt above reveals that qualified medical doctors like Bituki are in short supply. It is therefore an injustice for Bituki to be attending to only one man (the president) ignoring the generality of the people who need his service as well.

### 3. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion reveals that Omobowale's play, *The President's Physician*, x-rays ethical problems that are commonly encountered in medical practice as it is the case in Nigeria and elsewhere. The play, through the character of Dr Bituki, the president's physician, underscores the ethical standards of medicine as contained in the Hippocratic Oath, which are indispensable in rehabilitative and general medical practice. The play reveals that literature plays a potent role in facilitating a patient-centered approach to medical practice, either in a rehabilitative condition or a general therapeutic relationship. The essence of this dramatic statement is to improve, significantly, on biomedical practice. This, again,

attests to the role of literature in humanizing the medical profession.

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