The Raft

Unlike Song of a Goat and The Masquerade both of which deal with minor units of Nigerian society, with familiar agonies, The Raft takes up problems that affect the Nigerian society at large. Since fishing is the main livelihood of the people many are preoccupied with making materials connected with fishing. Carpenters and plumbers are involved in carrying wood from forests and making boats and rafts. So the playwright is presenting the problems of workers whose predicament has not changed for centuries. Labour apart there is the uncertainty of reward for their work. While crossing the river Niger they might be washed away into the sea or the raft might break sinking the men on it. Although this is an unavoidable thing some improvement and safety for the workers might have been ensured if the government showed concern for them. Clark through this play overtly suggests how poor have been left to themselves.

In Song of a Goat and the Masquerade the problems dealt with are fundamental to human existence. The themes of impotence and illegitimacy raise the plays
to the level of Greek tragedy. The fatalism which governs the lives of characters in those plays create tragic atmosphere. After such tragic themes Clark shifts to melodramatic and pathetic stories of poor who have to fight for their day to-day existence. Probably Clark was disillusioned with the performance that freedom promised. The social and economic conditions of the poor remained the same. The play, therefore, exposes the hollowness of the leaders and the corruption in the government. Hence the play has a topical interest dealing with the social and economic conditions of the poor.

In the opening scene of the play four lumbermen are shown on a raft. It is night and the men are sleeping in the cabin. Only Kengide is awake who is seen mumbling to himself while shuffling along the raft. He is complaining about Ogro's mumbling in his sleep. He guesses that Ogro might be having a nightmare in which he sees a crowd of bush cows chasing him and his being unable to escape because he is running on his head. Added to Ogro's nightmare there is the raft on which Kengide cannot sleep comfortably. Now Ibobo
wakes up and finds Ogro walking about. Ibobo warns him that if he continued with sleep-walking habit he would fall into the river and die. He reminds Ogro how only recently he had missed falling into the river. Ogro rejecting what has been said against him draws the attention of Ibobo and Kengide and Olotu that their raft has missed it's direction. To their amusement they realise the truth of the matter. The raft is at drift, the knottings are unfastened. This leads to the quarrel between Olatu and Kengide each accusing the other for the breaking up of the raft. Ogro thinks that it is neither the fault of Kengide nor Olotu but is handywork of some unknown being. Whatever the cause they all realise the raft is breaking up and they are all helpless. They try different methods to know where they are drifting and finally realise they are heading to the sea. Of all the people who is most worried about the safety of the rafter is Ogro. He has been promised his beautiful daughter by the chief, if he arrives safe. Kengide from the spinning of the bowl in the water understands that they are very close to whirlpool and may not get out of it. But Olotu assures everyone that they will row themselves safely. The scene closes with
Kengide summing up their predicament. The people who live in the delta regions of Niger are constantly exposed to dangers and he blames people for doing nothing about it.

That Shakespeare has influenced all his successors in the art of drama is common knowledge. His themes and dramatic situations have had their variations in plays written by dramatists. Clarke appears to be no exception as this opening scene of the Raft shows. The opening scene of the immaculate romance Tempest may have inspired the present one. In that Shakespearean play there is the threat of ship sinking which creates confusion among the sailors. Fear of losing their lives makes them find fault with ship's master who frowns at others. If Shakespeare presented the lively scene to suggest the maritime activity of England, Clark is only interested in the pathos involved in the careers of poor fishermen and lumbermen who spend their lives on the banks of Niger.

The Second scene opens hours later. It is morning and the sun is behind clouds suggesting that
there is no prospect of cheer for the sailors. Already the raft is caught in the whirlpool with no way out of escaping from it. Now the crew is faced with the problem of food stocks. After the morning meal Kengide breaks the news that the stock of food is out and there is no way of replenishing the stock. They is not even garri or plantain left. The bags are all empty of their sweet content. They all hope the ebbtide will change their course before evening. But there is also the fear that confluence of eight rivers might sweep them into the ocean. To avoid being swept away they need great care and skill.

While Kengide, Ibob0, Olotu are worried about the safety of the raft, Ogro seems more interested in food. He wonders whether they are to eat leeches and crabs which cling to the logs. Since they have lost their boat they cannot go to the shore for worms which may be used as bait. The pilate fish which jumps on to the boat is rotten. Ibob0 is afraid that Ogro's legs which are dangling in the waters might become a good bait.

It is amazing that while the lumbermen are
caught in the quicksands of death they do not lose an opportunity to have fun. When Ogro sleeps away for a moment on an errand into the cabin other have jibe at him. They take Ogro for a fool to believe that he will marry the chief's daughter. With not a penny in his purse, with poor parents he may not be able to pay the bride price. They wonder if a mermaid will give him a bouny. They are aware of the greediness of the chiefs who drain the delta of all reasoning. They will not hand out the best of their daughters to men like Ogro.

Ogro who claims to be adept in the art of fishing tells them that he knows how to fish and catch them. He plays a certain game and invites others to participate in it. While others dismiss his acts as inconsequential Ogro narrates how since childhood he has gained knowledge of fishing. Kengide on his part narrates how he too had the experience of fishing. He refers to a certain episode in which his friend is described as having caught a bird in water. In the course of the conversation a number of famous fishermen who were known for their fishing are mentioned.
After spending sometime discussing unimportant matters, they return to the predicament in which they are now. Olotu reminds them of the urgency:

Your stores may serve as wine
To your spirits, but have forgotten we are stuck
In a worse plight here? (p-109)

The scene closes with the threat of a storm. The group finds swallows gathering all over the place. They dive headlong into the waters and swing back into the skies. This is an indication of the storm. Soon the group starts gathering the baskets and rolling up the mat. Ogro, intelligent that he is, suggests that the mat can be used as soils. The suggestion is welcomed by all and they quickly get to work and a mast is erected. They are all happy that the raft begins to move. But joy is momentary because the raft breaks into two. Olotu finds himself on the broken raft and before others realise what has happened Olotu is carried away. Ibobo, Ogro, Kengide shout to Olotu to jump off the rotten raft but unfortunately Olotu cannot because he cannot swim. Ogro offers to rescue him but Kengide
prevents him from jumping into the waters for fear of being killed by sharks. Ibobo cries to Olotu to lower the sail but "the wind is too loud" that Olotu cannot pull the sail down. The scene closes with Olotu adrift and lost and the rest similarly adrift and lost.

Scene three is important in that it brings out the contrasting attitudes and characters of Ogro and Kengide. Also the scene provides a peep into the sufferings of people who live in the Nigerian delta. The scene opens with Ogro singing and playing on his instrument. He explains how in his part of the country grain is eaten away by black beetle and every day there is some one dying and someone being born. But for the people both are sad events. Ogro and Kengide analyse the situation, which is that they live in filth and poverty. They are sorry that Olotu has been washed away but Kengide thinks that Olotu might be safe.

Ogro surprises by his discovery by spotting a ship behind them. It is a Niger company boat. Ibobo hopes to get help from the ship's captain and Ogro takes off his tattered shirt and begins to weep. He cries to ship's captain to slow down. Before Kengide
and Ibobo say anything Ogro jumps into the water to reach the ship. He says that in his home town all boys do it. They swim in the stream to board the boat as they pass by and are often helped by people on the ship. They jump over board and then come back and climb up the board. They return after collecting arms full of gifts from kind captains and their men. Kengide and Ibobo try to stop him but Ogro is already in the water. They are hopeful that Ogro will succeed in stopping the ship. Ogro is a strong swimmer and is like a real fish but unfortunately he fails. He is being beaten by the ship's men and he falls back into the water. Finally he gets caught in the ship's stern wheeling engine.

Ogro is a very fascinating character in this play. An Ijaw he has different characters. Always singing, never afraid of death he does not care for life. As he says in the beginning of the scene crying is a regular feature in his community. There is also a mystery about him. There is an unearthly quality which marks for martyr.
When Scene Pour opens Olotu and Ogro are dead. Kengide and Ibobo are left to themselves. Kengide admits to have yielded to the temptation of money and to have joined the lumber gang. He works for an owner who "is miles away rolling on laps/of his innumerable wives". In the course of the conversation between Ibobo and Kengide many things are revealed: the corruption among forest officials, exploitation of the lumbermen by the timber merchants and so on. The police instead of punishing forest guard fellows who have put up buildings in towns and cities "are themselves feeding so fat, their belts and barracks/No longer can edge in the smallest/weed". The worst criminal in this game is the court which is itself corrupt. Men like Ogro plunge to their death. The corruption in this business and exploitation of the poor is best summed up by Kengide in the following words:

Man, it is

We ordinary grass and shrubs who get crush

As Mahoganies fall (p-121)

Ibobo is still haunted by Ogro's death. He remembers Ogro's skill in steering the raft. He can save with a slight flick of his wrist, the raft when
it is about to hit the shore. He curses the ship's men for killing him. But Kengide inhumanly describes Ogro as an idiot. He is not afraid of the curses. He says that all places are burial places. Death is death whether one dies of tuberculosis or of cold or in old age. No one will mourn the death. Calling Ogro as mad he says that the world has no sympathy for the mad, the drunk, and naturally foolish.

Ibobbo is disgusted with Kengide's cynicism and he is too tired to argue with him. He is eager to return to shore. Physically and mentally he is worn out. The death of Ogro still lingers in his memory. Kengide assures him that their raft is going in the right direction. Ibobbo himself notices lights at a distance. He in fact is excited and Kengide warns him that he might fall into waters. Ibobbo is so starved of sex that he tells Kengide that he loves to sleep with a woman. At this Kengide tells him how white men go on voyages for months. He also says that the white men are going to homosexual relationships. This provokes Ibobbo to say:

That is beastly. Even the goat that does
It with its mother will not take another
He goat from behind.

He narrates some more perverse acts of the whites:

How do you think they keep sane
In their great barracks and boarding schools? Why,
ADO's and holy fathers do it on their boys.

The final moments of the play show Kengide and
Ibobó, their raft engulfed in smoke and fog. They can
see nothing but hear hooting and howls from Burutu.
Ibobó hears the voices of the people as in a market,
the beating of the drums and smell of food. But Kengide
and Ibobó cannot see each other. Kengide warns Ibobó
not to jump into the waters because the waters have
sharks and stock fish and snakes. Ibobó is determined
to jump. Kengide asks Ibobó to take him because he is
afraid to be alone. Both of them jump into the waters
crying like women just as women do when they lost their
way.

It has been suggested at the beginning of the
chapter that The Raft has echoes of The Tempest. If the

latter play shows the sinking ship and allusion of dissolution of the society in the opening scenes Clark's play depicts society dissolving and dying. In both the plays navigation and the hardships of sailors are described. While Shakespeare is silent about the causes for the sufferings of sailors, Clark is critical of the government and attacks the greedy middle when who exploit the working class and the power wielding men who become fatter day by day. The chief strength of the play lies in this realism and topical allusion which reflect the life of people who live in the delta regions of Nigeria.

References

1. All textual quotations are taken from three plays of J.P. Clark published by OUP, London.