

The Construction of an Indigenous Cultural Identity Explored in African Drama

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Abstract

In the literary works of Africa playwrights, there is reflection of African societies in the area of culture and tradition. These playwrights include Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Zulu Sofola, Duro Ladipo, Athol Fugard, Kole Omotoso, Olu Obafemi, Femi Osofisan, Efu Sutherland, and very many others. Their literary works reflect high level of commitment, especially towards the less privileged and the society. African literary aesthetics is polarized into two opposing parts with each side of the dichotomy supported with the philosophical tenets of either Marxist or non-Marxist philosophy. The idealist or bourgeoisie, and Marxist views cannot be divorced from the political, social and economic experience of Africa. This is evident in how the Western imperialism has maintained its hegemony over Africans and their consciences. This is quite pronounced on the elites who swarmed on the imperialists with protests from the cultural and political spheres, which later resulted into independence for most African countries in the sixties. The present paper aims to focus on the construction of an indigenous cultural identity explored in African Drama.

Keywords: culture, identity, Marxist, philosophy, commitment

Introduction:

The colonial experience has shaped the African literature. African literature in English has developed since the 1950's only from cultural dispossession, there emerged a new identity and a new literature which was shaped by the colonial experience. As Lewis Nkosi puts it colonialism had provided the Africans with a common language and an African consciousness; for out of rejection had come an affirmation. The colonial experience shapes itself in different forms in the writings of African novelists, poets and dramatists. As it presents the challenge of confrontation between Africa and Europe, so also, it encourages writers as a means of evolving a national identity. On the one hand, the conflicting racial relations between

whites and the Blacks remain a matter of persistence concerns for some writers, on the other hand the assertion of Nigro culture through Negritude movement writers contribute significantly to the process of the emergence of 'Africa for the Africans'. It also generates the need to explore the clash between the old and new, the decay of traditional life and values, and the impact of westernization, the process of organization and the evils of colonialism. It is complimented by the writers whose literature voices resistance to the French policy of assimilation. Writers face a new challenge with the change in the political order and the liberation and from colonial wars.

Negritude Movement:

Negritude Movement offers the most powerful impetus for the African writers. It is a new literary movement which project against the injustice of white races. In the 1940, it becomes known as 'Negritude Movement' in Africa. The conferences of Nigro-writers try to direct all literary activity in the service of Nationalistic causes. They declare that the Nigro writers and artists regard it as their essential task and sacred mission to bring their cultural activity within the scope of the great movement for liberation of their individual people.

African playwrights have used their works to reflect the temper of African societies in the area of culture, tradition, religion and politics. Such great playwrights include Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Zulu Sofola, Duro Ladipo, Athol Fugard, Kole Omotoso, Olu Obafemi, Femi Osofisan, Efua Sutherland, and very many others. Their literary works reflect high level of commitment, especially towards the less privileged and the society.

African literary aesthetics polarized into two opposing parts with each side of the dichotomy supported with the philosophical tenets of either Marxist or non-Marxist philosophy. The idealist or bourgeoisie, and Marxist views cannot be divorced from the political, social and economic experience of Africa in general (many African countries like Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and others have a good dose of such experience), and Nigeria in particular. This is evident in how the Western imperialism has maintained its hegemony over Africans and their consciences. This is quite pronounced on the elites who swarmed on the imperialists with protests from the cultural and political

spheres, which later resulted into independence for most African countries in the sixties and for Nigeria, precisely in 1960.

Wole Soyinka contributed in the emergence and the development of literature, not only in African drama and theatre but in the world as a whole. This earned him the Nobel Laurel price in 1986. Wole Soyinka, through his works, has been an apostle of idealist philosophy and aesthetics or a drama of bourgeois aesthetics that usually project a cyclical view of history, which is steeped in the traditional African 'aesthetics of transcendentalism'. This type of aesthetics is described as traditional philosophy with quantum gods, spirits, the unborn, etc., mingling with humans within the same time-space. The themes, action and characters of these dramas are firmly locked within the clutches of fatalism and metaphysics and have a penchant for mythic interpretation of socio-economic and political issues. In this version of drama, the gods are in full control of the fate of everyone. No matter how the individual struggles, his chance of becoming successful is locked within the fate bestowed on him by the gods. It is quite obvious, therefore, that the masses do not stand any chance in this type of atmospheric condition. The few traits highlighted thus far align with the precepts of bourgeoisie art and this also reflects in the oblique technique employed in some of Soyinka's plays. This strongly shows that Soyinka's writings reflect metaphysical and individualistic outlook, which is identical with bourgeoisie aesthetics. Example of such plays is 'A Dance of the Forest' (1960).

Wole Soyinka's obsession with evil within man and, with war and violence as its manifestations throughout man's history is revealed in 'Madmen and Specialists'. Soyinka suggests that permanence of evil is revealed throughout the history of mankind from remote past through the contemporary present to the future. As it was in the beginning, so it is now, and it will be even in the future. For Soyinka the first act of violence is the most crucial because it leads to the insatiable lust for power which encourages the dictators to perpetrate more and more crimes against humanity. The forces of tyranny, thus, crush the individual voices of truth. It is the tragedy in which the good is wiped off by the evil of power. The play deals with how the evils of dictatorship stand most powerfully exposed through the dictators efforts to silence the voice of truth.

Ola Rotimi often examined Nigeria's history and ethnic traditions in his works. His 'The Gods Are Not To Blame' exemplifies thematic preoccupation, plot and character of an idealist philosophy. Fatalism which happens to be a thematic preoccupation of the bourgeoisie drama serves as the pivot on which the drama rotates. Although Rotimi's view in 'The Gods Are Not To Blame' represents a world where everything is 'fixed', where 'previous movements in history is twisted to prove that the logic in all the previous movements was to arrive at the present fixed status quo', he refrained from such negative outlook in his later works. This is evident in his other plays such as 'Hopes of the Living Dead' where the lepers survive against all odds through the collective will which is a symbol for African continent whose refusal

to develop economically and politically due to embezzlement and corruption could be likened to the disease of leprosy. Other plays by Rotimi which represent the collective will outlook are If... the Tragedy of the Ruled, Kurunmi, When Criminals Turn Judges, Who Is A Patriot? And many others.

Femi Osofisan's theatre shares some affinity with the theatres of Derek Walcott, Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal and others. His theatre is strictly that of commitment to the downtrodden masses and for a better society. He longs to see that the society is ridden of corruption, insecurity, and discrimination against women and all sorts of vices. For example, in 'One Legend, Many Seasons', Osofisan shows how the elite formed alliance with the military to impoverish the land to the detriment of the poor. Such complicity has led most African countries from prosperity to poverty and misery. Another example is 'Once Upon Four Robbers' where Osofisan poses the question whether it is justifiable to execute four robbers, who stole peanuts, while those who serve as judges and watch their execution are using their positions to steal billions at the detriment of the poor masses. The question is, is there any moral justification for that?

The inevitable violence is what Osofisan expresses in 'Red is the Freedom Road' where Akanji organizes a revolutionary violence against the ruling hegemony and crushes it to liberate the people from the shackles of slavery.

J.P Clark's tragedy '*Song of a Goat*' cast in the Greek classical mode in which the impotence of Zifa, the protagonist,

causes his wife Ebiere and his brother Tonye to indulge in an illicit love relationship that results in suicide. This play was followed by a sequel, *The Masquerade* (1964), in which Dibiri's rage culminates in the death of his suitor Tufa. The play *The Raft* (1964), in which four men drift helplessly down the Niger aboard a log raft. In his other play *Ozidi* (1966), there is a transcription of a performance of an epic drama of the Ijaw people. The play *The Boat* (1981) is a prose drama that documents Ngbilebiri history.

Duro Ladipo, Nigerian dramatist whose innovative folk operas incorporating ritual poetry and traditional rhythms performed on indigenous instruments were based on Yoruba history. Yoruba operas prior to Ladipo's were mostly moral exemplars based on Bible stories or folktales. Ladipo, by contrast, wished his operas to be reliable cultural and historical records, and he was painstaking in his pursuit of authenticity. In order to achieve greater dignity and dramatic impact, he dispensed with the traditional dances and the opening and closing "glees" usually employed for bracketing performances in Yoruba operas. For *Oba Koso*, his most successful work, he received a Nigerian government citation for cultural achievement in 1963. The work also proved to be popular throughout Europe and the United States.

Zulu Sofola, belongs to the second generation of playwrights to emerge to prominence after the Nigerian civil war. By far the most popular among this group is Femi Osofisan who is fast acquiring the title of Nigeria's most prolific writer and dramatist. Since their emergence, this group

of writers has made tremendous impact on the artistic traditions of their predecessors. All of them, at one time or the other lived and worked within the academic community. Zulu Sofola, as she is fondly called, occupies an important position in the history of the development of modern drama and theatre in Nigeria. As a pioneer female Nigerian dramatist

Césaire in his *Return to My Native Land* in 1939 highlighted three major issues; first, that Africa's past is not that of savagery (as wrongly conceived by foreign critics), though not to be romanticized, it was a past that cannot be divulged from our present and even future. Second, that Africa was oppressed by the colonial masters and her culture relegated to the background, probably due to the ignorance of the colonialists and, third, that the removal of colonialism with its strands was possible. Without mincing words, it is obvious that Césaire believed that 'colonialism visited concrete disabilities on the black man' (Onoge, 1978:388) and also believed that a change was possible through the collective will of the people. Therefore, the onus is on the artists to prepare the people mentally and psychologically through adequate and genuine orientation and education.

Césaire's wish after independence was that of peaceful and abundant community of men, women and children who are engaged in gainful labour: All that I would wish is to answer the universal hunger, the universal thirst to prescribe at last this unique race free, to produce from its tight intimacies the succulence of fruit (Césaire, 1969:75). Despite the serious criticisms that trail negritude, accusing it of

promoting racism, there is no doubt that if properly harnessed, especially from the perspective of the Césaire school, it portends brighter future for Africa and ultimately, her freedom from all whims and caprices of capitalism. Its principles have a lot in common with Marxism, Brechtian mode, Surrealism and the African heritage.

Critics and writers have lent their voices to this struggle through disrobing the European modes of bourgeoisie writing and criticism and amassing their literary weapons under African Marxist sociological aesthetics. It is through this that they have shown themselves committed to raising the consciousness of the people against all forms of oppression and slavery

The Construction of an Indigenous Cultural Identity explored in African drama. Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, and Duro Ladipo's *Moremi* are mainly focus on the cultural identity. The plays' mode of interaction with language, idiomatic expressions, and dance is indicative of the expectation of a drama that can be as socially functional as the indigenous African model while retaining relevance in a westernized world.

The transcultural practice is amply noted in Wole Soyinka's major plays. Soyinka's major plays reveal that traditional Yoruba belief, mythology, history and folkways constitute the source and background of these plays. The traditional elements are artistically blended with his knowledge of the literary drama of the classical and modern European writers.

Soyinka's major works captures the context of 'transcultural practice'. The term is used here to describe the system by which a society absorbs aspects of another's culture, and in the process assumes ownership of these 'foreign elements' by building them into its own popular traditions. The four plays offer a vision of African drama that not only derives from Europe and its imperial agenda of civilization, but one that relies heavily on indigenous African dance, rhetorical structures, and other aesthetic devices to convey performances that are both accessible and acceptable to the indigenous African mind. Apparently, all the plays are by Yorúbá authors.

The plays *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, and *Moremi* can be classified as first-generation African plays, while Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* is a second-generation African play. This is even so considering that the period in which most of them were written marked the peak of the nationalist movements that were sweeping across the African continent. As one would expect, an African identity was indeed a major expectancy in the postcolonial African drama that evolved, championed by the likes of the playwrights, by J.P. Clark, and by practitioners such as Hubert Ogunde. However, the nationalistic or pan-Africanist vision of first-generation playwrights and their fixation on ethnicity meant that a colonially conceived nation-state known as Nigeria was not often engaged with as a unified entity.

The current trend in cultural perspectives in African drama highlighted in Wole Soyinka's play 'The Road'. Modern

African Drama forms a part of the collective struggle of the African intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century. They tried to restore the dignity of Africa and provide a new orientation for African and all people of African descent world over. Soyinka, whose works alone seem to be enough to establish Nigeria's place in the Commonwealth Literature, is a veritable storehouse of different cultures and perspectives. Music, dance, and poetry have been associated with Nigerian drama since the earliest birth, marriage, and death cycle ceremonies and rituals. In *The Road*, Soyinka examines the complex as well as philosophical issues of life like death, self-realization, history or past, clash of cultures, and the crucial issues that prevail in the country and the continent. Wole Soyinka's play *Death and King's Horseman* reflects the cultural conflict between the African and Western worlds. The play is based on an actual event that took place in 1946 when British colonial authorities prevented the customary ritual suicide from taking place. In Yoruba society the community is more important than the individual. It was also their tradition for the first horseman to commit suicide after the king's death. When the realization of this tradition is prevented by the white authorities, the horseman's son, who had received a European education commits suicide in place of his father. It assumes concerning right and wrong which may have different connotations for black and white culture.

In her book on applied drama, Helen Nicholson recognizes that identity is not "constructed autonomously but in relation to others, through both language and other

symbolic codes available in different cultural practices"(Nicholson, 2005: 65). In particular, Nicholson's allusion to identity as being perceptible through "other symbolic codes" could be seen in the light of Diana Taylor's insistence that the cultural body is central to issues of identity (Taylor: 2003: 86). Identity is central to discussions about interculturalism and has continued to generate heated debates about the appropriateness of engaging with cultural practices recognized as being, in one or other shape or form, distant from one's own culture. Much of African performance and literature deal with the question of identity, usually through a continuous re/negotiation of the past, in relation to cultural origin, geographic origin and the debilitating experience of transatlantic slavery, in an effort to come to terms with, and make sense of, present realities.

West African drama defined the trend of cultural translation as it has been understood in translation studies via postcolonial and feminist theories. In looking at the tradition of Ghanaian and Nigerian anglophone playwrights we come to a richer understanding of the concept as it has been theorized in plays by both early playwrights like Joe DeGraft and Wole Soyinka and later playwrights like Jacob Yirekyi and Tess Osonye Onwueme, who continue the tradition. Not only do the West African texts show the value of translation and the translator to the cultures represented, but they also demonstrate the function of intra-cultural translation as a method to highlight and critique power differentials based on gender and class within their cultures. Ultimately, while West African

drama theorizes cultural translation to comment upon local cultures, it can also help to reshape global discourses within translation studies to enrich the debates that define the field while adding to our knowledge of the innovation and complexity of the West African literary tradition.

There are plenty of issues in the drama of African performance and society here to interest them as well. This analysis is used to differentiate categories of 'traditional', 'popular', and 'literary' forms in other volumes on African drama. Instead, References:

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Etherton approaches the problem of definition dialectically, revealing the contradictions and social context of categorization in relation to the interplay of class and culture. This examines the cultural dialectic of autonomy and dependance, integration and alienation; and the political one between critical playwrights and autocratic institutions. Most importantly, the author treats African drama not as artifact but as process, centered in the relations of cultural production and in the dynamic of consciousness.