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**Classification and Criticism of Nigeria Literary Drama**

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**Abstract**

*Nigerian drama has gained prominent and permanent position on the world literary map especially with the winning of the Nobel Prize by Wole Soyinka. In spite of this, problems of definition and criticism of Nigerian drama still persists. The Relativist-Evolution controversies on the origin and classification of Nigerian drama laid the foundation for this definition, but the building has remained uncompleted. Scholars offer divergent views on the issue of evolving authentic literary cannon(s) for the evaluation of Nigerian dramatic literature. These views are documented in this study which is an attempt to reawaken scholastic debates, discussions and interests on the proper place of African literature in general and the Nigeria literary drama in particular as it concerns evolving appropriate critical models. There is perhaps, no higher challenge facing Nigerian dramatists today, then initiating and evolving authentic and indigenous critical theory/theories. Who said that Nigeria cannot produce an Aristotle a Betolt Bretcht, or a Derrida?*

## **Introduction**

Literary criticism is a vital aspect of literature in its role in the appreciation and interpretation of literary works thereby projecting the writer and the works. Literary criticism takes different forms based on different theories Plato and Aristotle laid the foundation of modern literary criticism. Plato postulated a criticism that emphasizes content while Aristotle's postulation accentuated form. Other numerous theories have emerged with some aligning with Plato, some with Aristotle at varying degrees. Unfortunately, many African scholars do not regard any of these models as appropriate for the evaluation of African literary works. Emeyonu (2000) laments the lack of African initiative in the criticism of African literature as one of the main reasons for the slow pace of the development of African literature as an academic discipline both within and without the African content today.

This assertion underscores the scholastic debates, discussions and interests on the proper place of African literature and the appropriate criticism for it because, as African literature emerged, foreign scholars used the Western literary cannons to evaluate it without considering their relevance to African literature. They concluded that African Literature was sub-standard. African critics reacted, attacked the Western critics and rejected the use of foreign theoretical models as yardsticks for evaluating African literature. They countered the euro-critics with anger and bitterness insisting that the Western critics had no right to impose any critical model on Africans or to evaluate African literature with any pre-conceived or biased notion. Consequently, some African scholars insisted on the necessity for the formulation of theoretical models for African literary works.

In his contribution to the need for the formulation of what one might call an African literary theory, Udentia (1993) condemns almost all the critics of the earlier generation and accuses them of merely trying to "justify" their University training by using foreign critical theories for the evaluation of African Literature. He insists that they are:

Ever willing to regurgitate the hard canons of critical scholarship they have imbibed within a hollow matrix of content – form the analysis, or gravitate towards obscurantist permutations of decadent euro-centric literary scholarship: structuralism, semiotics, post-semiotics, post-deconstructionist etc. (p. XI)

He goes further to group the earlier critical works into “dull, uninteresting and hackneyed tradition”, “quasi-intellectual; and pseudo-scientific throwback into an obscure ....blacklist ideology....with its tings of racial bigotry, etc”. This attack is unjustified because many of the earlier critics are pathfinders for the younger critics whose cause Udentia claims to be espousing and they produced brilliant and useful works that served as a guide for aspiring African literary scholars and critics. He should also realize that African critics need to start from the existing cannons maybe with some modifications or invention of new ones based on observed inadequacies of the existing ones. However, there is a sense in his argument that critics must not necessarily insist on the use of western literary theories to evaluate African literature.

Dapo Adelugba agrees with this and in discussing deconstruction for instance he opines: “I don’t think we can really afford flirtation with Derrida and his group ....” He feels that the acceptance of this theory will mean an imposition of cultural ethos of the Euro-centric Western World on African literature. Amadi (1992) also consents to this view and advises that

African critics should not just accept the pronouncement of any foreign critic, no matter how eminent, on African literature. A foreign critic cannot be in a position to appreciate the cultural nuisance of African literature. Western critical models are not sacrosanct. (p. 20)

He concludes humorously by urging African critics to work hard to arrive at respectable critical options because the days of “armchair critics” are over, adding that the *Agbada* dress serves the Nigerian as well as the three-piece suit serves the English man in his country. In his own contribution, Nnolim (2000) explains that this call is necessitated by the uniqueness of African literature,

...as distinct from any other (especially in our myth-making as a way of shunning western rationalism, in our use of African overture as the foundations of our literary endeavors, in our emphasizing rural rather than industrial way of life, in our emphasis on communal and collective existence, in our group solidarity rather than pursuit of industrialist endeavors in adherence Europe’s clockwork ideas of progress and regression. (p. 7)

In his own contribution, Irele (1998) wonders why Africans should hold on tenaciously to European conception of literature and criticism when Africans

...have at hand an alternative framework of cultural references against which to measure the western conception of literature and the critical procedures it gives rise to. We did not therefore need Derrida and his Yale followers to remind us that a literary text deconstructs itself even in its moment of production. Our rural literature provides sufficient evidence of this new institution of western scholarship (pp. 99-100).

In support of the argument Izebaye (1998) opines that

In a growing literary culture, the cannon is hardly ever stable or final ...every generation has an opportunity to shape its literary preferences according to its own perception of the values it considers essential to the continuity of its trading (p. 110).

Chinweizu et al are more emphatic and unequivocal in their demand that

African critics must develop an African aesthetic, encourage an awareness of African tradition and play the role of critical intelligence guiding the transmission of African cultural value (p. 287).

This is necessary because according to Okpaku, quoted in Nnolim (2000) "...the primary criticism of African art must come from Africans using standards" (p. 8). Nnolim in the same article agrees that the issue of African standards has been

the subject of numerous debates on the pages of very influential journals devoted to the criticism of African literature...and a host of in-house journals emanating from various English and literature department of African universities (p. 8).

He however regrets that these debates

...never resolved the burning questions of what constitutes the African aesthetic in literature ...critics argue vigorously

about the accuracy of their perspicacious insight but the (main) ...remain largely unresolved (p. 9).

He argues further that “African literature is an autonomous entity separated and apart from other literatures..., it has its own traditions, models and norms” (p. 4). He therefore urges and challenges the critics of African Literature “...to catch up with the stylistic analysis of literature” (p. 14).

The above challenge by Nnolim sets the tone of this study which attempts to document proposal made so far by African critics in that direction. However, postulating their cannons, critics must remember Lindfors’ warning that:

Common sense just does not allow a single tribe of critics to claim monopoly on clear vision ...indeed: if all interpretation were left to native critics, truth might be sought principally on local level; it’s a universal dimensions all but forgotten. (ALT 1975:54)

It is important for African critics to heed this warning and ensure the universal acceptability of any critical model adopted.

In his own proposal, Ngara recommends stylistic criticism. In this, the critics is expected to

...use the tools of the linguist and stylistic rules [with focus on]... minute details of grammar, lexis, phonology, prosody, meaning, as well as with ... the relationship between the author and his audience, ...must relate his analysis of linguistic features to considerations of content value and aesthetic quality of art ... he is much interested in questions of value as the conventional critic while at the same time he seeks to assimilate as much of the insights of stylistics as possible (p. 12).

Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2000) in an earlier contribution identifies Neo-Formalism which evolved after his review of three critical works *Accents in the Novel* by Helen Chukwuma *Studies on the Nigeria Novel* by Earnest Emeyonu and *Approaches to the African Novel* by Charles Nnolim. Ohaeto concludes that:

The complex resonance of the discussion by the three critics is part of the establishment of a common framework

for suitable approaches to the African Novel. The few flaws and impressive virtues of (the tests) ... reflect the essential critical issues involved in the mutation identified as NEO-FORMALISM (emphasis mine) and the need for more responses from the established and new critics (p. 44).

However, in a more recent study, "African Critics and the Socio-cultural Responses to African Literature" (2000) Ohaeto recommends a pragmatic approach to the criticism of African literature. He explains,

This pragmatic criticism involves the utilization of the sociological, aesthetic and moralistic approaches, all of them blended to produce practical results and values associated with human interest in the society ... (Here) the various aspect of creativity are taken into account by the critic who must be sensitive and perceptive, depending on his understanding of the writers, the society and the vision in the works that is being considered (p. 19).

Similar to this pragmatic criticism is the social criticism advocated by Chinweizu et al (1980). According to them, this model,

...demands that critics evaluated a work not merely on its preeminent but its contributions to the society's thoughts and understanding of what the work has to say, and by showing where the work stands within the society's literary tradition (p. 33).

Izebaye (1988) who believes that African criticism so far had taken into consideration social implications contends that:

African criticism has tended to move from a test-centred approach to one that examines literature in terms of social relations. This shift was anticipated by an earlier insistence on relevance and social commitment (p. 135).

However, he suggests that

It is crucial that critical methods reflect the place of the audience in lending significance to literary tests. Meaning matters most at the point of reception, whether directly in the actual reading of specific texts, or in diffused secondary

forms of semi-literary communication that is often converted into popular images, prejudices, and stereotyped impressions. An essential part of the critic's tasks is to clarify the process by means of which such meanings are communicated (p. 135).

The issue of relevance and commitment mentioned by Izebaye is amplified by Udenta (1993) as he proposes his revolutionary aesthetics, which according to him is

“...a qualitatively new artistic formulation (which) though necessarily sustaining a link with artistic practices of the past has created a new artistic practice corresponding to the new revolutionary reality (p. 52).

In this new concept, the critic, in addition to the exploration of the content of the work is expected to scrutinize the ideological position of the writer and “... the level of consciousness (of the writer) historical condition, and resolution of the conflicts indicated in them” (p. 16).

There is no doubt that African critics owe a lot to the western ones who cleared the path and lead the way in literary criticism and that it is difficult for African literature to divest itself completely from these constructs. This should not be mistaken as enslavement to them because contemporary literary discourse is still evolving with more inventions and re-inventions of concepts and theories. Some of them are not just difficult to define but also hard to understand. For instance the term post modernism is a problematic one because in a literal sense, it is absurd to talk of post modern in the modern world. Bertern (1994) recognizing this ambiguity and problem notes that “Right from the start of the debate, post modernism has been a particular unstable concept; no single definition of post modernism has gone uncontested or has even been widely accepted (p. 5).

If some of the foreign concepts and theories are difficult to understand, how effective then could they be applied in African literary criticism? So, there is really need for an adoption of theories that will be valuable within the African context.

### **Nigerian Literary Drama**

It is clear that Nigerian dramatic literature draws its elements, form and content, from the oral tradition and the rich artistic and cultural heritage of the people. The subject matters are drawn mainly from history, myth, legend, tradition values, belief systems and contemporary issues. What is not clear, however, is the mode of categorization and evaluation of this literary drama. For instance, what constitutes tragedy or comedy? Do we really need the categorization?

The popular articulated and documented categorization of Nigerian drama was by J.P. Clark who grouped it into two broad headings – traditional and modern with sub-divisions. Literary drama falls under the modern drama category. Etherton (1982) categorizes it into traditional and art theatre. Art theatre refers to literary drama, which he claims is university based, “...encumbered with conventions and critical theories that pile up good grades in the old English schools and are good for nothing thereafter”. (1982, p.74)

Some categorize drama based on the historical development of literary drama itself and the Nigerian society. Saint Gbilekaa suggests four groups, the negritudinists, the arts-for-arts, the critical realists and the social realists. He says that the negritudinist is an indigenous concept while the rest are universal. Obafemi (1988) in an article on the development of Nigeria Drama categorizes it into Onitsha market literature, dominant and emergent. In his submission, mostly semi-literature traders and teachers etc wrote the plays of the first group. The subject matter ranges from romance to moral and social issues. He includes Ene Henshaw’s play in this category. The dominant plays are works of earliest playwrights like Soyinka, J.P Clark, Ola Rotimi and Zulu Sofola. In this group according to him, there is usually combination of indigenous artistic elements with classical forms. Most of them treat the issue of “Man’s search for peace and harmony via the cosmic realm ... the playwrights ... are generally existentialist in their search for formal excellence, sometimes to the detriment of content (p. 57).

The emergent plays, according to him, treat contemporary issues especially social ills, proffer solutions in form of a restructuring of the society for equitable distribution of national wealth and the entrenchment of social justice. In most cases, there is a recommendation for a revolutionary change from the capitalist to socialist society. Most plays written after Nigeria Civil War are in this group. The play wrights include Femi Osofisan, Bode

Sownade, Kola Omotosho, Esiaba Irobi, Tess Onwueme, Onyeka Onyekuba and many others. These playwrights insist that man should be able to find solution to his problem and should not depend on any other being. This can only be achieved through collective action. Obafemi (1988) ends his discourse by calling for an appropriate "... scientific approach of conceiving and perceiving our dramatic culture" (p. 59). The search continues.

Most dramatic scholars focus on the dominant and emergent plays, which for the purpose of this paper I will simply call the tragic aesthetic and revolutionary aesthetic. There is also a third group of plays, which do not attract much attention of the critics. These are plays, which treat contemporary issues, but which do not proffer solution in the manner of the tragic aesthetic or revolutionary aesthetic but leave the audience to judge and decide for itself. The playwrights in this group "use their plays to lay the ills to society by employing characters who embody these ills and whose action help to pollute the system (Nwabueze 1992, p. 226).

This is referred to, in this paper, as the liberal aesthetic, Soyinka's *Trials of Brother Jero* is a good example of this. Now that we have grouped Nigerian plays into three broad groups, what are the yardsticks for the dramatic genres of comedy, tragedy, or who is a tragic hero for the Nigeria playwright?

The Nigeria playwright is not interested in arts for art's sake. Theatre is a tool for social engineering depending on the perspective of the playwright. The Nigerian playwright therefore uses his work to mirror his society, ameliorating them to make the society a better place for all.

Irele (1988) opines that Nigeria drama is tilting

..... towards comprehensive social, derived from the close attachments of our lives and in their exploration of the vicissitudes of our corporate existence .... (it) is in some way or other a testimony to the realities of the social processes at work among us and to the tensions these set up in our collective conscious (p. 104)

In formulating the proposed critical tool, what will the critics look out for in Nigerian drama? Some scholars complain that Soyinka is obscure and difficult; J.P. Clark is pessimistic; Zulu Sofola maintains the status quo while Femi Osofisan and his groups are revolutionary. This last group receives the greatest applaud and also the greatest negative criticism. The proposed

critical model should be able to accommodate these various styles and visions.

Femi Osofisan, a playwright and a critic insists that the most important elements to look out for in a play are form and manner. In an interview with Awodiya he opines: "... if people pay attention to form, to manners, to ways of outward expression, our society would be much better" (Awodiya, 1993 p. 61).

Should the critics concern themselves with just form and manners? with content and form? with the theatrically and general aesthetics of the plays; or with myth and cosmology? The task before Nigerian dramatic scholars is enormous. They have been working on plays using different theories most of which are euro centric but there is need to formulate, given names and articulated so well that students could use them just the way they use Marxist literary theory feminism, deconstruction, and other. This yardstick must take into consideration the fact that drama is deeply rooted in the culture and religion of the people. Theatre is culture bound and it will be difficult to judge a particular theatre without being in touch with the peoples' cultural background. One common feature of most Nigeria plays is the concept of the total theatre. That is fusion of music, dance, folklore, myth and other traditional rhythms and values in these plays. It is not enough to say that we have communal tragedy in Africa, what constitutes the communality in the tragedy? Is the hero an individual or a group of people? What makes him/them a hero(es)? If he is an individual hero, is he a lone hero or a hero encouraged and supported by the people as suggested by Osofisan (2001, p. 210). What determines heroism? These and many more are questions that need answers to enable the scholars arrive at an appropriate decision. It is necessary to harmonize the existing views and decide on the paradigms that would help to form each theoretical framework. For instance, in revolutionary aesthetic being championed by Udentia the critic, in evaluating text, looks out for the following:

- a) The evaluation of how form and ideology synthesize in the text.
- b) How conflicts are resolved.
- c) The revolutionary sympathy of the writer, in other words, whether the subscribes significantly to the revolutionary viewpoint and
- d) The level of class-consciousness in the work.

Gbilekaa (1997) also proposes the new radical approach. He needs to work further on the concept, articulate it more and give it a name. According to him, in the plays, the critic is expected to examine the following:

- a) The ideological content of the play.
- b) The presentation of the realities of the society in the play.
- c) The reflection of these conflicts in form and content of the play.
- d) The play will be such that it can be transferred and stage in a community participating form.
- e) The structure of the play will be loose to accommodate members of the audience.

In a recent study, Obafemi (1996) posit that: dramatic art and literature, as social arts is culturally conditioned and oriented. Although its functions and validity carry universal imports, its relevance and effectiveness are first those ascribed to it by the relevant indigenous culture (p. 276). Given this background therefore, according to him, there is need to ... adopt the particular stance of an essentially African artistic aesthetic name and explain its attributes for other scholars, especially, the younger generation. He also acknowledges in the book that there have been calls from scholars for the development of an authentic aesthetics. To support this, a whole issue of Ufahamu's *New Approaches to African literature* of 1973 is devoted to this. Unfortunately, this goal is yet to be realized.

The debate on which language creative writers should write in has been on also. Those who insist on adopting indigenous language argue that it will be difficult to exploit the various nuances of the original language in a foreign one. Another strong point is that writing literary texts in a particular language helps to develop and perpetuate that language. The opposing school of thought argues that plays written in indigenous language will have a limited audience, therefore, will not have universal acceptability.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is true that dramatic theories can have negative or a confining influence on the playwright. Nevertheless it is needed to serve as a guide or check for both the writer and critic. The playwright should be free to experiment with form so nobody should prescribe for him/her but he/she should also be able to write with a good sense of dramaturgy which the

theories could help to inculcate in him/her. As for language, Nigerian playwrights should be free to experiment in any language or a combination of languages. They should, however, strive for consistency especially if it is used for the delineation of character. Ola Rotimi's experiment in *Hopes and the Living Dead* (1977) is commended and Tess Onwueme's code-switching in *Then She Said It* (2002) and *No Vacancy* (2007) is also recommended.

### Notes

1. Prof. Dayo Adelugba was reacting to Prof. Obafem's inaugural professional lecture. Both of them agreed that Africa Literature has nothing to do with Derrida's theory. (This Week Magazine, June 1998:32).

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