

THE PLACE OF THEORY IN THE CRITICISM OF DRAMATIC LITERATURE: AYAKOROMA'S *DANCE ON HIS GRAVE*

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Abstract

The environment and injustice are part of the concerns that are located within the fields of Eco-feminism and Eco-criticism. These concerns are universal. Sarah Ray Jaquette, a professor at the University of Oregon, USA, came up with the concept of *the Ecological Other*", by which she sought to highlight issues of social injustice 'embedded' in U.S. environmental policy and practice against the *ecological others* whom she identified as, Native Indians, People with Disabilities and Migrants. This paper examines the works of two Nigerian female writers, both of them reputable and versatile as feminists who are also environmentally conscious and concerned about issues of injustice against women in our societies. In other words, they are Eco-feminists. Eco-feminism describes a feminist approach to understanding ecology. Eco-feminists usually draw on the concept of gender to theorise on the relationship between humans and the natural environment. This paper attempts to reflect both the natural environments and the psychological domains under which injustice is meted out towards women and how these women respond to these situations in their lives. The women as represented through the chosen texts are thus considered the environmental/psychological *others* whose *bodies* have become the objects of social injustice in our own social domains of Nigeria. However, some of these women have been shown to have overcome *victim-hood* to become agents of positive change; negotiating and promoting social justice.

Introduction

Many writers have attested to the paucity of criticism in the field of drama. John Gassner, one of the foremost American dramatic, critic said that the theatre of his time was concerned not with dramatic criticism but with what he called "reviewerism" which is a practical box-office consideration (129). In my thirty years of studying and teaching dramatic literature, I have come to realise that the great majority of people who are interested in drama rarely read plays. Rather, they are much more interested in seeing theatre. Even the postgraduate students of theatre arts see play-reading as an excruciating experience and at worst unnecessary. I had to employ different strategies to get my students buy and read plays. They would rather use their money to watch theatre and films.

The situation is not different from that in more developed nations like Britain. Raymond Williams lay similar complaint when he wrote that, “few people see any need for literary criticism of drama; it is the reviewers of performance who are dramatic critics” (15). The assumption that the value of a play does not have anything to do with its literary value is wide spread and common among lovers of drama. However, it is argued in this paper that a play is a unique art form, different, though related, from its theatre, that is, its realisation on stage before a live audience. It is an apology for dramatic literature.

This paper is written to demystify the cult of boredom enshrouding or associated with reading dramatic literature and to propose reading, theorising and criticising plays as a pleasurable experience, indispensable for the flourishing of theatre, to support. I am strongly in support of the position Dr. Johnson that, “A play read affects the mind like a play acted” (in Majorie 24); or even much more than a play acted, an assertion hotly contested by Boulton Marjorie (24), but demonstrated through the critics of Barclays Ayakoroma’s *Dance on his Grave*.

Theory and Criticism

On a general level, theory refers to “a set of ideas which claim to explain how something works” (Haralambos et al. 7). It is a system of ideas aimed at explaining something. Man had always tried to provide explanations to phenomena. Before the advent of theory, man used folktales and myths to proffer explanation to occurrences or realities around him, especially strange or outstanding ones. There are tales that explain, for example, why coconut has water up in the tree; why the tortoise has fractured shell; why a particular hill, stream, and so on, is the way they are, among others. In this way theory help us to understand our world better.

Theory is abstract; it is an abstract formulation used for explaining something. It is often based on general principals independent of the thing to be explained. By themselves, theories are not explicit until when applied in explication. Theory originates in the 16th century and means, “a mental scheme or something to be done” (34); for the Greek word, “thoria”, means speculation, contemplation. Theories are primarily sentential, that is, expressed in form of sentences, for example, “Art is an imitation of life”, is an abstract sentence aim at explaining the phenomenon known as art. A theory is an explanatory sentence that has form and content. Sentence is its form, and its subject, the content. The content of the theory “Art is an imitation of life” is ‘art’ which is its object of concern. Terms like: “Marxism”, “formalism”, “Feminism” are labels for theories, the theories are what they state, for example, the statements, “Art is technique”, “Art is a representation of the inequality in the relationship of man and woman” are theories of art within the theoretical labels known as “Formalism” and “Feminism”, respectively.

Not every statement is regarded as a theory. Theory is a scientific formulation or proposition. It is systematic. Theories begin with a close observation of phenomena, of things happening around us or the world around us, our environment. Out of the things we see, we gain knowledge through induction and deduction of the phenomena. With the knowledge, we put forward opinions, assumptions, or propositions concerning what we

observe in order to bring the reality closer. The hypothesis (untested assumptions, ideas, or propositions) are logically organised and expressed in form of statements, that is, in the form of sentences, and the sentences become systematic organisation of formulations. When these hypothetical statements are widely tested over time and are generally agreed by experts in the field as authentic explanation, they became theories.

A theory is therefore a set of inter-related propositions which can explain and predicts certain phenomena. This way, theories are organised principles, a set of principles by which we explain phenomena, and on which the practice of an activity is based. It is an objective tool, a scientific approach because the abstract deductions from nature are concretised in the sentential formulations. They are empirical statements, that is, axiom which can be generalised in place and time. The statement, “Art is a representation of life” is considered a theory of art – objective, factual sentence that explains the concept and field of art. Hence, it presupposes that any recreation of life in a unique, beautiful; way is art; be it visual (like in fine arts), or audio (like music) or literacy (like in poetry, fiction or dramatic literature). Theories can also be non-empirical when they are subjective, historical or hermeneutic statements of life. Every field has its own theories which explain the field. Dramatic theories are tested and widely accepted propositions in sentence form which explains the meaning of drama, its function(s), component parts, characteristics features as well as the principles of creating and analysing it. The emphasis in this research is on the literature of drama, not on the performance of drama. It is therefore the literary theory that is of interest in this paper.

Theories have content, and the content of theories is their subject matter. The subject matter of dramatic theories is drama; the subject matter of linguistic theories is language, and the subject matter of dramatic literature is the stage play, the literature of theatre. Apart from the subject matter, every theory must have epistemological essence, that is, it must be related to another field or another body of knowledge outside it. For example, dramatic theories are related to the fields of sociology, psychology, history, philosophy, and performance, among others. In fact, the history of critical theory, that is, literary theory, is related to the history of philosophy. Theory is dynamic. It is open to growth and changes. Nixon insists that theory is shaped by practice and must be understood in terms of the relation between practice and thinking:

I do not contribute to theory by first understanding what theory is and then developing a theory of my own. I ‘do’ theory by developing collaborative models of thoughtful practice that challenges, taking for granted assumptions and suggest new lines of enquiry (28).

There are off-shoots and exceptions to every theory. In theory, we appreciate the importance of language. It is the duty of man to use language to concretise his reality.

Every theory must also have methodology. An analytical framework which is a sequential or systematic process/procedure of analysis must be designed for the explication of its subject matter. Every theory of art, for example, “Art is a presentation of the inner life of man”, must have laid down procedure for analysing art in its own way. A theory is useless if it cannot be realised. Theoretical formulations or statements must

be explicated (explained) through some realisation. Dramatic theories for example are realised or explained through its components and practice – theatre like playwriting, acting, directing, designing, plot, character and characterisation, setting etc. It is in these that the theory is explicated and realised otherwise it remains an abstract statement. The criticism of dramatic literature is the practice of its theory.

Generally, criticism is a careful study of something in order to give an informed judgment about it or explain its meaning. According to John Gassner, “criticism... is a form of public opinion” (120). Specifically, it is the art of interpreting, analysing and judging works of art. A critic is an interpreter. He reads meaning into a work in order to interpret it and explain it to others. In this way, a critic is co-playwright by helping to make play meaningful to its users. Summaries of plays, and other critical explanations, for example, are ways a critic helps to make the play more meaningful to the audience so that they can understand them better. To be a judge, a critic must be a scholar. Adequate knowledge of the field or the subject is necessary for making an informed judgment. Criticism should be authoritative by making the criticised object its main consideration based on objective principles.

Many critics are averse to impressionism, which according to its chief proponent, Anatole France, “relates the adventures of the critic’s soul among works of art” (in Gassner 121). Gassner refers to such criticism as “helter-skelter criticism” because it disclaims all objective judgments; admits no standards except those of personal impression; does not pass judgments, and claims no authority for judgments but registers an individual impression, a single man’s reaction to a work of art (121). Although subjectivism cannot be ruled out completely in criticism, it should not be the sole basis for judgment. The best, common practice has been to employ some standards or general principles of execution to the content of the work and the artist’s art in achieving or realising his aims. There is therefore a symbiotic relationship between theory and criticism. Criticism is the application of theory while theory provides the critical terms, perspective and criteria (principles) for criticism. This relationship is not different from the theory and criticism of dramatic literature.

The Place of Theory and Criticism in Dramatic Literature

To understand the place of theory and criticism in dramatic literature, one must first understand the concept of dramatic literature. Drama is primarily an art; a complex art. One common characteristic of all arts is the power to arrest and sustain the attention and interest of its audience. This power in art is commonly referred to as artistic beauty or aesthetics by which arts, in creating or recreating life is able to engage its audience in one way or the other. The complex nature of dramatic art makes its definition problematic. There has been a controversy whether drama is literature or an activity, a social event. For Aristotle, drama is a species of poesy, an imitation of life: “The name of ‘drama’ is given to such poems, as representing action” and “the poet may imitate by narration” (Aristotle 4). It is a re-enactment of action because it imitates men in action; re-enacting the story of their endeavours on stage before a live audience.

Plot is seen as the soul of drama. Following Aristotle, artists and art critics like Ulli Beier, Adrian Roscoe, Ruth Finnegan, Michael Echeruo, Graham White, to mention

a few, employ the notion of drama as literature with its essentiality of narrative or story pattern in investigating the presence or otherwise of drama in Africa in the 70's. For them, there was no drama because of the absence of "a longer story with complicated plot acted out" (Beier 271); lack of "linguistic contents, plot represented in the interaction of several characters" (Finnegan 500-501); Lack of dramatised story which is the absence of elaboration of the hidden myth" (Echeruo 146, 142); but only "signs of drama", "nascent drama" or "embryonic drama" with "some interesting dramatic phenomena" (Roscoe 177, 181) which do not even show "a clear chain of sequential stages of development from ritual to drama" (White 18).

At the other extreme, critics like Elder Olson, Ossie Enekwe, and Bernard Beckerman, to mention a few, see drama primarily as theatre with its essentiality of activity, social events and other performativities as the ingredients for drama. For Beckerman and Enekwe, drama is an activity, "involving the interaction of the audience and three performers within a public space" (Enekwe 15); while Olson reiterated his disagreement with the definition of drama as "a form of literary composition", insisting that, "a play is not a literary composition. It is something which 'may involve' literary composition" (8).

None of the two opposing views of drama accounts for its richness and complexity. Drama as a complex art form is a synthesis of literary and the theatrical arts. It is futile trying to separate the symbiotic relationship between dramatic literature and dramatic performance. The **Preface** to *Norton Anthology of Drama* makes it clear that drama "is grounded in the different mediums of writing and physical enactment", and hence pays dual allegiance both to "the spectators of its theatrical realisations and to the solitary reader". Drama is therefore a literary document and a live event (ix). Drama as literature refers to the dramatic text, published as a play, or unpublished as manuscript or script. The literature of drama, that is, dramatic literature, like poetry and prose fiction "utilises plot and character, develops a theme, arouses emotion or appeals to humour, and may be escapist or interpretative in its dealing with life" (Perrine 903). A play is the dramatic literature, a unique literary form written primarily to be performed and not to be merely read. Drama as theatre is the collaborative product of playwrights, theatre managers, designers, directors, choreographers, audiences and actors and actresses.

Drama is therefore a two-legged art which can be realised as literature (a play as script) and as performance (theatre). Its literary aspect is the blue print for its theatre while its theatre is the essence of its literature. It is therefore a fallacy to assume that "the value of a play has not necessarily anything to do with its literary value" (Williams 15). The fact that a good play can make a bad theatre, and a bad play can make a good theatre shows that though they are interrelated, they are nonetheless unique art forms. Hence, "To consider plays as existing simply as literature, without reference to their function on the stage, is part of the same fallacy as to say that plays need not be literature at all". (Eliot 110). The emphasis on this paper is on the literature of drama; to emphasise the fact that reading and evaluating a play can be as educative and entertaining as seeing a theatre, if not more. This is because reading a play is dynamic; it involving a mental visualisation of its theatre. The reader immerses himself in the world of the play while feeding his fancy too with the arts of the playwright an intellectual activity Ellen Gainor

refers to as, “reading drama, imagining theatre” (82). This is demonstrated through the criticism of Ayakoroma’s *Dance on his Grave*, a stage play.

The criticism of Barclays Ayakoroma’s *Dance on his Grave*, an attempt to analyse and interpret the play in order to assess its worth, is based on concepts drawn from some literary theories which informed it. It is true that, “all literary interpretation draws on a basis in theory” (“Literary theory” 1). Literary theories refer to “the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining or interpreting literary texts”. Simply put, they are “principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts or from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in multiple interpretative situations” (“Literary Theory” 2). A theory of dramatic literature is a literary or critical theory which offers the meaning of a play, its major functions, the main elements of dramatic literature, and above all, the criteria for the writing and analysis (criticism) of the plays based on it.

As a point of fact, every literary theory provides its critical terms, analytical perspective and criteria for the analysis of the work based on it. The theory may be sociological: “drama is a representation of the real world of men”; psychological: “drama captures the inner life of man”; formalist: “a play is a wealth of techniques”; feminist: “drama captures women’s fight against forces of oppression”; Marxist: “drama represents class inequality and oppression”; post-colonial: “a play recreates colonial exploitation and black man’s struggle for survival”; post-structuralism: “drama presents the antics of man in the web of existence” (absurdist); “a play is a violent outburst of suppressed experiences” (expressionist); “drama is a metaphor for life” (symbolist); “a play creates images of being and becoming” (semiotic); “a play is a celebration of surfaces”, and so on. Each of the above examples of dramatic theory has implications for the writing and analysis of plays that are based on it. It is the task of the researcher to uncover the critical theory or theories that inform Barclays Ayakoroma’s *Dance on his Grave* and employ the terms, perspectives and principals for analysis they provide to evaluate the play in order to support the view that a play read affects the mind, offering as much education and/or entertainment as the play seen.

Dance on his Grave: Women’s Struggle for Freedom in the Battle of Sexes ***Analytic Framework***

The perspective for the analysis of *Dance on his Grave* is literary, based on concepts drawn from feminist and formalist theories. Feminism is a 20th Century literary theory that champions the view that women are subdued, marginalised and oppressed in society that is fundamentally organised in favour of men. For feminists, women in society are powerless and occupy secondary, ignoble position compared to that of men. Hence, the relationship between man and woman, gender relationship, is unequal and oppressive with the consequent battle of domination and its subversion in women’s quest for freedom. Radical feminism best informs Ayakoroma’s *Dance on his Grave*.

Unlike liberal feminism which holds culture and traditions accountable for women oppression and hence proposes women’s individualistic quest for empowerment and self-actualisation as the strategy for emancipation, radical feminism sees women’s physiology as the main reason for women’s subjugation together with its accomplice,

man, the human symbol and perpetrator of oppressive cultural traditions and its number one beneficiary. It proposes female bonding and a separatist stance from men in a tough, fatal battle in which men must be overcome and pulled out the way for women to be liberated.

The radical feminist concepts of women oppression, separatist bonding and struggle for liberation provide the core analytical perspective in the criticism of *Dance on his Grave*. The oppressed women of Toru-Ama unite to take their proper place in their society, and hence engage the men, their husbands, in a dangerous battle for supremacy. The battle is fought based on Charles Darwin's Law of the jungle where only the fittest survives, and on this general level, the husbands crush the women's stubbornness with their physical might; they are the fittest, but not the stronger. The fight on the private level between King Olotu and his wife, Alaere, is a psychological one based on August Strindberg's concept of gender relation as a "battle of sexes" in which the women are stronger; hence, Queen Alaere employs the power of insinuation within women's biological essence to crush the mainly ego of the king and sends him into the grave on which the playwright invites her to dance.

Formalism is another label for all theories which held that a work of art like a play is a self-subsistent entity capable of meaning on its own without reference to external or internal realities outside it. Unlike feminism, which prioritises the content or subject matter, which are realities of social life outside the play, formalists insist that the meaning of a play is within the play and can only be uncovered through a close analysis of its formal elements. Mark Scholar, for example, opines that technique is the authentic means of dismantling a play in order to judge its worth since, according to Cleanth Brooks, a work of art, like a play, is a "well-wrought urn", that is, a perfect craft from a good craftsman. The formalist concept of textual analysis proposed by Richard's *Principles of Literary Criticism* is applied to the analysis of *Dance on his grave*.

Textual criticism tasks the critic to undertake a close reading of a particular play making implicit, the theoretical principles controlling its analysis and only bringing them in as occasions demand. The play is therefore interpreted in terms of its subject, organisation, techniques and style based on general standards of excellence proposed by the formalist used. *Dance on his grave* is a well-crafted play where the boundaries of tragedy and comedy are broken, and serious issues are *farcicalised* and drowned in boisterous laughter.

The World of the Play

Toru-Ama, like Africa and more specifically Nigeria, is a patriarchal society, one where male dominance thrives on women subjugation and power is the prerogative of men, crushing women to silence and powerless. Toru-Ama is a post-colonial Nigerian community where normative ideals of masculinity strive to perpetuate its hegemony despite the reality of a shifting landscape. The men of Toru-Ama, with their King, King Olotu, the *Akpobirisi* of Toru-Ama and the symbol of hegemonic masculinity, are uncompromising in maintaining and enforcing their traditional roles as "husbands" of their wives and "heads" of their families. They insist that the boundary of hegemony

must be kept sacrosanct: “Husbands are husbands; and wives must be wives”, says King Olotu (Ayakoroma 76).

Unfortunately, their wives, the women of Toru-Ama, with their leaders, Erebu and Queen Alaere, are radical feminists. They are discontented with the marginalised position their society offers them as wives and mothers. They believe the men, their husbands are the perpetrators and beneficiaries of their oppression. They take unilateral decisions about the affairs of the land and even concerning the upbringing of children. They as wives and mothers are neglected, silenced and marginalised. The women are aggrieved and decide to adopt serious measures to force the men to grant their requests to have a say in the affairs of the land: to stop the impending war with Angiama and collaborate with women in the upbringing of the children (24). The women decide to start a war in the families if the men turn down their demand.

As expected from men who are blinded with normative manhood in a modern society, the women’s request is met with stiff opposition and outrage from the men; as they declare:

Apodi: What? Do they want to husband us? This is unheard of! Women wanting to put on thinking caps!

Osima: It is utter rubbish! They think taking care of the affairs of this land is the same as haggling in the Zarama market? (58).

With the men and women uncompromising in their stance, the battle line is drawn. The world of the play reverberates with discontent, contestation, confrontation and crisis which degenerate into a gender war that claim the life of a king.

The gender war in Toru-Ama is fought on two levels: the social, communal level and the psychological, private level. Andrea Cornwall observes that: “contemporary struggle ‘to be a man’ are framed by expectations that are rooted in normative ideals of masculinity which began to fragment in colonial times and were increasingly contested...” (233). On the communal, public level, the women of Toru-Ama embark on a women collective action to forge a common front in the pursuit of a common goal. All they want is freedom, Alaere explains:

Alaere: If any woman does not like her freedom; if there is any women that wants to play second fiddle to a man forever; if there is any that wants to remain a slave, to be only in the kitchen, look after children alone, and not sit at table with her husband; and if there is any woman who likes to have her sons killed in a senseless war; let her do otherwise (33).

In fact, there was none, and the women map out their strategy for liberation. At their meetings, they agreed on the weapon of stubbornness, explained by Alaere in the following way:

Alaere: Stubbornness! If they say come here... uhm uhm! Go there. Uhm Uhm! Pick up the child ... Uhm Uhm! Prepare food for me... uhm uhm! If he

touches the loose end of your wrapper... leave me alone! If he wants to force himself inside you, you close your legs, kpaalam! (31).

Hence, the women refuse to do bed and domestic work. Although they argue on the difficult nature of its execution, they encourage one another to stand firm for success, should stubbornness fail, and the men beat them instead of granting their request, they agree to employ their second strategy: "We shall found our own settlement" (32).

The women's weapon of stubbornness is matched with the physical might of the men, their husbands. Initially at their meeting, the men decided to ignore them, "Let us ignore them. Are they not women? They will soon tire out" (59). But when they realise that the women are serious and unflinching, they decide to crush the women's will with their physical might. They embark on a caning spree of the wives that fling the women back to the kitchen and force their legs wide open to let the men in. The social war fought on the public arena was won by the men, but that was just the beginning. The men are the fittest, yes; but they survive only to witness a more damaging "battle of the sexes".

The psychological battle is fought in the private court of King Olotu, among king Olotu, his wife, Alaere and their daughter, Beke. The bone of contention is the upbringing of their daughter: King Olotu wants Beke to go to the city and study the ways of the white man; his wife wants her to stay at home. As always, King Olotu believes that as the head of the family, he has the sole right of thinking and taking decisions for his family, including Beke's future. He closes all avenues to compromise and refuses her wife a say in the matter, dismissing her views as unacceptable "feminine logic". He declares:

Olotu: I know my rights and I'll have them! I have the final say as the head of this family! I'll have no one, woman or child, encroaching on my rights (49).

His wife resorts to a more dangerous weapon. She leaves the social and cultural front and penetrates the King's psyche. She resorts to the power of women's physiology, the same biological determinism for women's oppression, and sees in it the tool to expose the limits of the phallus, the very essence of man and masculinity. The war became deadly as she uses the power of insinuation and supposition to imprint in King Olotu's mind that he might not be the real father of their daughter, Beke in order to break his hold on Beke and actualise her own wish. Since it is widely held that it is only the mother who knows the real father of her child, Alaere asks the King, her husband:

Suppose I was telling the truth just now when I said Beke was my child, my own child, and not yours... suppose it is true, you would have no more rights over her (523).

Alaere's play on the insinuation dealt a deadly blow on his husband's manly ego. His last resort to physical might in trying to strangle Alaere fails. Beke's objection to his violence: "If you can treat mother like this, then you are not my father" is the last straw

that breaks the camel's back. The sinks into despair and he commits suicide by drinking a potion. Hence, although the women are not the fittest, the woman is the stronger.

Women communal action is a favoured technique by African playwrights. The bonding may be between two female characters as that between Aisosa and Ede in Salami's *Sweet Revenge*, Obioma and Daalu in Ezenwanebe's *The Dawn of Full Moon*, among many others, in a spirit of sisterhood. It may also be among the female characters in the play as with the women stone crushers in Ezeigbo's *Hands that crush stone*; the wives of Lejoka-Brown in Rotimi's *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again*; or even with a whole community of women as with the Erhuwaren women in *The Wives' Revolt*; the women of Illa in Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*, to mention few.

Similarly, the common strategy always includes the power of the feminine physique, the female body that is refusal to sex and domestic chores. The "stubbornness" of Toru-Ama women is akin to the "Duty Strike" of Erhuwaren women as well as the "Naked Dance" of the women of Illa. It is only unfortunate that that of the women of Toru-Ama fails to yield fruit unlike the others mentioned above. It is not surprising that the women's stubbornness fail in the play, *Dance on his Grave*. The playwright, Barclays Ayakoroma, is one of the trusted custodians of African culture. He is an apostle of cultural orientation, and the fact that the women's demand fail to succeed in the play is a dreadful affirmation of hegemonic masculinity with all its violent oppression against women. There is a dire need to re-orient Nigerian men for a life of gender complementarily needed in contemporary time.

The Style of the Playwright

Dance on his Grave is a formless form where issues that claim the life of a king is realised in boisterous comedy and farce. It is like Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* where the fatal consequences of war are theatricalised in the antics of the Mendicants – a group of mangled humanity. Ayakoroma employs comedy and farce in recreating social issues in spousal relation. He is more of an Horatian satirist; "an urbane, witty, and tolerant man of the world, who is moved more often to wry amusement than to indignation of the spectacle of human follies, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy, and who uses a relaxed and informal language to evoke a smile at human follies and absurdities – sometimes including his own" (Abrams 138-139). However, Ayakoroma evokes not 'a smile' in his play but a roar of boisterous laughter, which dries up at the death of King Olotu. I could also perceive the playwright's laughter at the follies and antics of men and women of Toru-Ama as they deploy tactics for opposition and counter opposition. The play is thoroughly entertaining in its physicality. It reminds one of the deflated eulogies of women by Auntimi's, who together with the playwright, Ahmed Yerima, make mirth of the wives' foolishness in *The Wives*. I could hear the playwright mocking in the background as the men and women make jest of their own follies in *Dance on his Grave*.

The meeting of both the men and women of Toru-Ama is punctuated with lots of comedy and sometimes ridiculous, senseless interjections. The mapping of the "serious strategy" by woman includes ridiculous suggestions that: "No woman shall allow her husband to marry a second wife" (25), and that to avoid being under men, "The woman should be on top when sleeping with her man" (25); a suggestion that does not go down

with some of the women; for it would not be easy if one has a broom stick of a husband (with) big calabash (27), but “If you have a bulk of an elephant as a husband, the idea of sleeping on top appeals to you” (27). Similarly, Chief Atuaba’s suggestion that women and their stubbornness be ignored fails to go down well with Biriala, who asks: “How many of us can control the togging of the muscles down there?; since “the thing has no ears...” (59); and he was advised to “look for a rope to tie it” (59).

The hilarious comments diffuse the seriousness of the issues and show the playwright subtly distancing himself from the subject. For Ayakoroma, as for some African male playwrights, women issues, especially the fight it is generating, is quite uncalled for and unnecessary. He disapproves of it, and shows his disapproval in the crafty way he uses language and creates characters. The play is full of theatricalities. It is an action-packed play where the technique of performance is at the centre of the drama, making the full power of the drama available to be deploy on stage (Williams 33). The dramatic action reverberates in salutations and group responses on almost every page. Songs, movement and dances, pursuits, “shouting matches”, direct audience address, hot argumentation, attempted fight, caning fiesta and many more, result in a visual elaboration of actions that facilitate and enforce the communication of language. The play produces a theatre of the mind, making reading the play a dynamic process of what Gainor et al. refer to as, “reading drama, imaging theatre” (82). Reading *Dance on his Grave* is more than imaging the theatre, rather the reader is engulfed in the flamboyant activities; he is lost in the world of the play.

Ayakoroma’s style is also a subtle disapproval or denunciation of the feminist ideal, especially the radical feminist aesthetics displayed by the women in the play. Like Ayakoroma, many Nigerian male playwrights dwell on the radicalism of the first wave of Feminism to discredit feminist ideals. He utilises well the power of the playwright to give life to his characters. His objectionable characterisation of the women leaders is a subtle castigation of the feminist ideals they stand for. For example, Erebu is “a short, stern-looking woman” (21), and Alaere is “another short woman with an aggressive air” (22). Alaere, King Olotu’s wife, is represented as a vicious being without mercy who is swollen-headed and flexes muscles with not only the men of Toru-Ama but also with her husband, the king. She calls to mind the she-devils like Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon*, Lady Jezebel of the *Holy Bible* and Tola, the “Rock of Gibraltar” in Ahmed Yerima’s *The Portrait*. Neither her physical appearance nor her character commends her to the audience. They are presented to be rejected by the audience. In this way, the playwright disapproves them and their leadership in the play, thereby castigating Feminism and feminists.

Many African and Nigerian male playwrights prefer to emphasise all that is obnoxious in feminist ideal and neglect all that is commendable not only liberal Feminism but also in the womanist method of coordinating and harmonising differences so that they do not disrupt relationship (Phillips xxii). The women are called names: “you hens”, (38), “egg-heads” (39), “crab” (55) and their gathering described as “gathering of hens” (36), just as they chatter away like “weaver bird” (21). The men enjoy a more sympathetic characterisation. King Olotu is cool-headed, a good king in defence of the

tradition of his four fathers. While his death elicits pity from the audience, the life of his wife evokes contempt. King Olotu is presented as the victim of the she-devil of a wife.

This is not surprising because August Strindberg, whose concept of gender relation as a “battle of sexes” is dramatised by Ayakoroma, is an avowed hater of women. Strindberg wrote *The Father* to mirror the presumed ignominy he has suffered in the hands of women, especially his wives. Here lies the weakness of the play – the deployment of Strindberg’s “battle of sexes” on Nigerian gender relation in the world of the play is as foreign and obnoxious as the radical feminist separatist stance. It is, however, commendable that the playwright does not allow any of them chart a way forward in the African life of gender complementarity disrupted by colonial experience. As far as I am concerned, the wonderful play, *Dance on his Grave*, ends after the men’s success at the canning scene. The later part is merely attached to assuage the playwright’s urge to make his views heard on the issue of women liberation struggle, an intention that could not be realised in the play because he adopted the stance of authorial extension which allow the dramatic action to be propelled by the characters interacting among one another in specific context. There are also few occasions when the voice of the playwright is heard behind the utterances of the characters. A good example of an authorial intrusion is in Erebu’s speech: “I am very much disappointed that we have been chirping like sunbirds, and quarrelling over frivolities...” (28). This is clearly the voice of the playwright casting verdict on the women’s action.

Conclusion

Dance on his Grave is a good play. It is a mock feminist drama; a good dramatic literature, but a literature that talks and works. “A true play”, according to Boulton Marjorie, “is three-dimensional; it is literature that walks and talks before our eyes” (3). In it, the controversy of Echeruo – Enekwe axis melts away. At a time when theatre is documented in audio-visual discs, there is no need to argue that a play is but only a documentation of a live theatre event.

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