

The Constraints and Prospects of Post-military Literary Engagement in Nigeria.

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Abstract

Nigerian drama since independence has been in a constant state of flux; from the tradition of the pioneer conventional playwrights to the playwrights of the radical aesthetics beginning from the 1970s and beyond, in theory and practice, it has presented itself as an ever-dynamic genre with attendant frustrations and hopes; the major challenge being the continuing dominance of the older generation of playwrights over the fledgling creativity in the face hard socio-economic milieu and state tyranny. This paper evaluates Nigerian drama since the holocaust of the Civil War period and the years dominated by military dictatorship, and makes projections with few dramatic texts, what the scope of Nigerian drama, in theory and praxis, after General Sani Abacha is and should be.

Nigerian drama has, arguably, never had a dull moment in theory and practice. From the traditions of the pioneer dramatists through the second generation to the new voices, it has presented itself as an ever dynamic, ever-growing genre. Consequently, throughout Nigeria's chequered history (the constitutional anomaly of the First Republic, the fratricidal carnage of the Civil War, the squandermania of the Yakubu Gowon regime and its attendant oil boom lavish, the lasciviousness of the Second Republic, the tortuous years of military misrule to the present democratic experiment), the role of drama and the dramatist in moralising, identity and character formation, etc., has not only been enterprising but also purifying. These periods have variously been captured in such plays as Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*, *Madmen and Specialists*, *King Baabu*, Osofisan's *A Restless Run of Locusts*, *Midnight Hotel*, *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, Ojo Bakare's *This Land Must Sacrifice*, Hagher's *Swem Karagbe*, Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures*, to mention just a few. The above plays fall into the different categories of playwrights according to generation, namely: the first generation of early post-independence conventional playwrights, the post-civil war radical playwrights whose subject matter became the then running battle between capitalism and socialism and fronting for the latter in their ideological confrontations, the middle generation which emerged in the dying days of Marxism as praxis, and the new generation which are a product of the last days of military dictatorship in Nigeria and Africa. This last category

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has been christened “new voices” in Nigerian drama (Akoh, “Ideo-aesthetics” 146-168). This classification is reached from the conviction that in their search for aesthetic ideology they attempt disparately to reach new goals or build on or re/deconstruct old dramatic canons within ideo-aesthetic boundaries in both language and theme.

For the first and second groups of playwrights, critical literatures abound, all of which variously provide bases for classification in ideology and aesthetics. Either as in-depth critical materials on individual playwrights or a generation, these first two generations have enjoyed a much-privileged (if not prejudiced) critical attention to the point of a rehash. Apart from the avalanche of essays and chapters in journals and books on individual playwrights, full-length books such as Olu Obafemi’s *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre*, Victor Dugga’s *Creolisations in Nigerian Theatre* and James Booth’s *Writers and Politics in Nigeria* bother on these generations. Saint Gbilekaa’s *Radical Theatre in Nigeria* remains the most authoritative treatise on the second generation drama and dramatists to date. And since Gbilekaa’s outing no single book has been published to embrace the generation after Osofisan. The present author’s doctoral thesis, “Shifting Paradigms in Ideo-aesthetics of Post-civil War Nigerian Drama”, however provides a scintillating leeway through the various traditions since the holocaust of the civil war to the present as it takes these traditions in their divergent merits and demerits within a postmodernist framework. Stephen Inegbe in his “Drama and Theatre in Nigeria after Soyinka” has also done a somewhat historical survey of Nigerian drama following Soyinka’s generation. These and many others are a record of a continuing tradition of criticism. But while in the latter only a passing attention is given to the new playwrights, my espousal of the shifting trends in post-war drama gives an extensive space of critical attention to six new writers, namely Irene Salami, Julie Okoh, Alex Asigbo, Ahmed Yerima, Ojo Rasaki and Tracie Utoh. This paper is of the view that the face of both dramatic writing and dramatic criticism in the millennium would unequivocally be defined by the level of attention given to these new playwrights.

Interestingly, since the exit of the military in 1999, play texts have not ceased to flood the bookstands from both the old and new playwrights. Some of these post-1999 plays are: Ojo Bakare’s *Once Upon a Tower*, J. P. Clark’s *All for Oil*, Soyinka’s *King*

Baabu, Osofisan's revised version of *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Our Wives have gone Mad Again*, Sowande's *Super Leaf*, Yerima's *Ire and the Liman*, Victor Dugga's *A Bridge of Strings*, Hagher's *The Travails of James Scott*, Alex Asigbo's *War of the Tin Gods* and *The Reign of Pascal Amusu*, Effiong Johnson's *The Stolen Manuscripts* and others. Hardly do any of these plays deviate from the burning issues confronting postcolonial transitory state of Africa or Nigeria. Be it the first generation or any other, Nigerian drama has since moved away from the 'cold art' of Gao Xingjian (594-601). Consequently, in the present state of affairs, playwrights of the older generations, in order to still remain artistically and socially relevant to their environment, have either modified their artistic vision or totally abandoned it for a new one that is more germane to the times. While Soyinka has abandoned the lofty shrine of Ogun for the public proletarian space in his last two outings (*The Beatification of Area Boy* and *King Baabu*), Femi Osofisan has virtually defied being caged within the second generation aesthetic ideology of popular justice for which he was arguably the most prolific. Radical theatre therefore has in his hands been remoulded or repackaged to meet the needs of the millennium (Akoh "Metaphysics" 130-143). From his revised *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* to *The Life of Ajayi Crowther*, Osofisan now opts for a more sympathetic and subtle approach to the problem of leadership, poverty and inter-group relations in society. He has therefore abandoned orthodox Marxism for a more subtle, humanistic approach; a somewhat 'reformation of Marxism on revolutionary front within the postcolonial 'transitory' democracies of Africa and the Third World' (Akoh "Popular Justice" 22-36, "Historicist Hermeneutics" 11).

I have made some projections elsewhere on the scope and new face of the drama of the millennium:

Four major plays are critical to post-military drama in Nigeria – the revised version of *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, *King Baabu*, *Then She Said It* and *War of the Tin Gods*. The first, written in 1999, was the last major play of the twentieth century; the second and third, the first major plays of this century; and the fourth (published in 2002) seeks a marriage of aesthetic ideology of the old and new. All of these plays seek a definition of the scope of both artist and the people in Nigerian drama of the new age. While *Aringindin* and *King Baabu* clearly define the scope

of post-military literary engagement in Nigerian drama, [Then] *She Said It* explains the needed communitarian spirit of post-feminist drama and *Tin Gods* draws us close to the need for a functional aesthetic theory for playwriting and practice (Akoh “Ideo-aesthetics” 214).

With a redefinition of their erstwhile artistic spirit especially of a conventional playwright like Soyinka and a ‘toning down’ of orthodox Marxism in the hands of its most prolific spokesman in Nigeria, Osofisan, a meeting point is charted between critical realism and socialist realism in Nigerian theatre. This also may be responsible for why it is a bit difficult to put a nametag on the new playwrights who are more interested in themes rather the question of ideology. It is however interesting to note that of the four representative plays in the quotation above one comes from a new playwright and many more have been published since that submission.

One obvious fact is that playwrights of the ‘new’ generation are still struggling to find their feet within the highly competitive space of dramatic writing in which both the first and second generations are still actively participating and dominating. Some of the reasons for this development shall be advanced later. While the feminist playwrights are so enraptured in making more political statements like most of their artistic forebears, the non-feminists seem to be so much issue-oriented that they lose grip with form and technique or end up at jerky artistic experiments, which show that their fledgling creativity is still in search of the artistic finesse now common with the older generation of playwrights; a trend that is common with every developing literary tradition.

Part of the general constraints to new writings from new writers is publishing or better still, the barriers posed by publishing houses. In their choice of texts (be it drama, poetry or prose) to publish, Nigerian publishers always would go for already established authors that can fetch them monetary gains; there is hardly any room for new writers whose fledgling creativity may even hold more promise than it was with established ones at the early stage of their artistic development, if only given the opportunity.

Because of this rejection many budding playwrights remain cowed or simply stop publishing after one or two attempts; and hence their artistic flowers would be truncated at a time they are ready to blossom.

Another constraint is the dearth of critical writings on these new writers even after investing their personal funds into self-publishing. Nigerian critics (of which this writer is a part) are still obsessed with the writings of the older generation like Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Rotimi, Sofola, Osofisan, Sowande and sometimes Tess Onwueme. Even with the avalanche of dramatic pieces that have been born in the 1990s from Iyorwuese Hagher, Olu Obafemi, Efiong Johnson, Julie Okoh, Stella Oyedepo, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Toni Duruaku, Irene Salami, Bakare Ojo-Rasaki, Chris Egharevba, Greg Mbajiorgu, Ahmed Yerima, Alex Asigbo, Barclays Ayakoroma, Solomon Iguanre, and a host of others, as critics in academia we have connived with our students writing long essays and dissertations to either silence the new writers or completely decapitate them. This, in my opinion, appears to be the most biting of all the obstacles facing new writing in Nigeria today. Dramatic criticism seems to thrive only on the works of the *masters*. With only a few exceptions like Hagher, Obafemi and Yerima who have enjoyed a festschrift each on their writings (the latter has two now), most of the new playwrights remain relatively unknown through our silence of rebuke for their works! On the heels of this scenario comes the inevitable question: Where are the Dan Izevbayes, the Ogunbas, Abiola Ireles, Jeyifos, etc., through whose criticisms the works of the first and second generations of dramatists became popular within and outside of Nigeria? Why are there so many outcries over the dearth of (good?) dramatic writing in the face of the so many plays still being written and produced on the Nigerian stage? It is principally because both old and new critics find it probably unbecoming to make them subjects of literary criticism.

For both the old and new playwrights, one hurdle however to cross is the simple assumption that the battle has already been won over dictatorial regimes after the exit of the military. This is a costly assumption that can make the theatre of any nation to slumber or compromise its call. And with the invasion of the home video and collapse of a reading culture in Nigeria, it becomes an even more difficult task for new playwrights to break even with the Nigerian audience.

In spite of the many odds against new dramatic writings in the Millennium, playwrights of this generation seem to be showing an indefatigable spirit with their continuous production of plays that reflect stark realities of the time. As earlier observed the number of new plays published between 1999 and now is incredibly high. With the interesting revision of artistic positions by older generation of playwrights, an artistic wedlock may with time emerge between the old and the new playwrights. This appears to be part of the call in Asigbo's play, *War of the Tin Gods*, which also shows a growth in the fledgling creativity of the playwright. An artistically relevant adaptation of Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, the play brings up for interrogation a nagging national question through a parody of the aesthetic ideology of two great Nigerian dramatists of an older generation, Woye and Emi. Like Aristophanes' Aeschylus and Euripides before Plato, Woye and Emi (indubitably Soyinka and Osofisan) debate the merits of their individual works before the throne of Olodumare to discern whose creativity should be adopted in the place of the moribund state of creative writing (playwriting in particular) in the nation. This is a response to the call by the younger generation of playwrights themselves led by Aki and Aba (the language of these two young writers sounds Ojo Bakare's and Asigbo himself) for a resurrection of the two sages. In the heat of the debate, Orunmila appears and recommends a blend of the ideo-aesthetics of both writers for new writing in Nigeria, to which Olodumare consents.

Crafted in the spirit of the prologue in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, which pleads for support and patronage for the dying comic art of Seventh century England, Asigbo in *War of the Tin Gods* thus interrogates the ideo-aesthetic weakness (or is it relevance?) of playwrights of his own generation and calls for an artistic renaissance. This call in Asigbo's play clearly gives an indication and promise which his latest outing *The Reign of Pascal Amusu* holds as an artistically relevant work to Nigerian drama of the twenty-first century.

Much hope also abounds for the feminist playwrights. Moving from their hitherto militant facile feminism they are now shifting to a more humanistic, sober and reflective approach. This is a most interesting development considering the manner in which military dictatorships have crumbled across the African continent. The forces of reason

and subtlety or cunning, not the might of guns, only can change the *status quo*, the post-feminists seem to be saying. This is evident in Tess Onwueme's last dramatic outing – *Then She Said It*, which she has re-titled now as *What Mama Said*. Indeed, among all the 'feminist' dramatists in Nigeria, and the most significant ones, her plays stand out as most representative of this creative movement. From her first major play in the facile radical feminist persuasion, *The Reign of Wazobia*, to her maturation in *Tell it to Women* which advocates for what I have elsewhere termed African Womanism, this paradigm shift is evident (Akoh "Poetics" 136-143). *Then She Said It* is only an amplification of this temperate but significant paradigm shift. This latter persuasion has been embraced by some of her younger artistic compatriots like Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh in very clear ideoaesthetic explication. Utoh-Ezeajugh's plays are simple and executed without the usual political cant prevalent in the plays of her fellow 'new' feminist voices. What has privileged Utoh-Ezeajugh above this group is partly her daring spirit and unambiguous presentation of the characters' strength as well as their foibles. While recognising the place of the women, she still takes an unambiguous post-feminist stance, a privilege, which she appropriates, bringing her close in ideoaesthetics to the latter phase of Onwueme's writing.

Of the new feminist playwrights, Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Our Wives have gone Mad Again* opens up a dialogue between old feminism and the new post-feminist ideology. The obvious merit of *Our Wives* is in its ideological twist from the norm, a twist which stands as a foil to the almost infallible picture of the 'new' woman presented by the many, sometimes self-styled, feminist writers in their bid to overthrow patriarchy that ignores the intricacies of time, environment and individual experiences. Utoh engages her dramatic writings not only with the discourse on feminism but other contemporary sociopolitical issues of both national and international concerns. The inference then on the feminist dilemma in Nigerian drama in its search for originality and relevance within the post-feminist framework is that feminism or feminist theorising is still in its transitory stage, and feminist scholars need to broker a theory that recognises the limits of experience and practice.

Generally, again, as the trend continues to betray the realities of the time, one cannot however gainsay the value of the work that the new playwrights are doing; their

works portray stark realities of the times, as do the television and the home video all of which need in time to come to improve on their techniques (Akoh, 2006b). Their generally simple language may also be in their earnest desire to get closer to the people for whom they write and whose lives they hope to touch positively; considering also the gnawing problem of language in African literature generally. More so, these new voices can be categorised in the group of the ‘famished’ artists all of whom are products of the military years. Unequivocally, then, these playwrights will also grow, as did their artistic forebears. When the enabling environment begins to emerge, one may begin to also witness works that are not only ideologically pungent but also artistically germane.

At the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria, Alex Asigbo and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajuh have started an experiment of publishing collections of new dramatic writings, an experiment that if well harnessed and sustained holds so much hope for playwrights of this generation. For instance, in the latest collection, new writers like Saando Iorngurun, Edward Ossai and Izu Nwankwo have been published and introduced into the Nigerian critical market.

What then should be the scope of literary drama in Nigeria hereafter? What should be the direction of its criticism? As already observed above, the availability of an enabling environment, namely the economic conditions, ready or easy access to publishing houses, etc., may be a an engendering factor for us to also witness works that are not only ideologically pungent but also artistically germane. More of experiments like the Bode Osanyin’s Writers’ Resort in Lagos should be encouraged and sustained. New playwrights would also need to strengthen their focus more on the new power structure that is building capitalist strongholds around the common people in the new democratic environment. Consequently, concern for subject matter should be privileged over any other consideration, for art should not be the voice of the individual alone but also that of the collective will of the people.

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