

African Playwright as Re-Writer of History

Nwachukwu Harrison Iweka
Faculty of Humanities
Department Of English
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Port Harcourt Rivers State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

History has often provided creative writers with source materials. African writers have used historical artifacts to re-create misguided information to the outside world. This essay entitled: The African playwright as a re-writer of history examines the African Historical drama as aesthetics representation and misrepresentation of African realities. It deals with the re-interpretation of colonial history, especially as concerning conquest and resistance. This paper concludes that historical drama portrays all dramaturgy that reveals past events in some society. It is regarded as the totality of how man creates and re-creates himself. This is because all literature begins as an experience and ends as a creative work. However, without experience or history, there will be no literature.

INTRODUCTION

History has often provided creative writers with source material. This study will juxtapose the relationship between history and literature. This study takes on the drama genre as a focus. It will study historical drama as aesthetic presentation or misrepresentation of African realities. One will demonstrate that literature can be used effectively as a tool in the reconstruction of past events, and national significance which the colonizers sought to represent in a manner that endangers the Africans. This is a known fact in African literary sphere. This is supported by another critic, Ngũgĩ when he said that "Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics?". Historical drama portray all dramaturgy-features of colonial experience that reveals past events in some society. It is regarded as the totality of how man creates and recreates himself. According to Micheal Etherton:

Historical drama provides themes specific to the dramatist world-view, such as all human struggle for survival. Furthermore, the obvious transformation of history into drama uses history as a tool to achieve a drama of heroism in a more recent manner (P.50).

This quotation above lends credence that historical drama is in line with history because it qualifies the fictiveness of drama, while drama questions the reality of history. This is why another critic takes the same stand, Tejumola Olaniyan saying that "we may see historical drama as a fiction based on actual facts and rendered in dramatic form". The assumption is that the reality of historical drama as a mixture of facts and fiction has led us to the contentious issue. Historical veracity versus dramatic license, which means to what level does the historical plays approximate its sources? However, in the presence of any departure, does play still qualify as 'historical'. Nevertheless, plays written and performed by Africans will reveal aesthetic representation or misrepresentation of African realities. As observed that history provided creative writers with source, these however, due to the medium of their expression necessarily undergo transformations in one way or the other. However, historical verifiability does not constitute the proper basis for their assessment. In drama, the distinction between a mere historical reportorial drama and exciting historical drama lies in the technical ability to transform history into art. It is effort of critics to restore the health of Africans that lead to recreation of historical fact: into literary works. African writers have set for themselves the limited task of probing the ways and means whereby the Western imperialism has maintained its hegemony over African literature. It is those whom the history affects that can best explain the intricate of such history. However there were cases of foresight African rulers and instructions that rejected and resisted colonialism and imperialism. The story of resistance and incarceration found itself in eventually all African nations. An example of West African such works is Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* whose historical setting is the Benin Kingdom in the late 19th century. An East African example of such works is Ebrahim N. Hussein's *Kinjeketile* whose historical setting is the Maji Maji uprising of July 1905-1907, which started in Kilwa in present day Tanzania. Also the play by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and M. G. Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* also protested against the plight of the black workers in South Africa.

The play by Ngugi and Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* celebrates the Kenyan struggles for survival in East Africa, History has it that the sources of this play is traceable from the diaries of Lord Lugard, who in 1890 was one of the very first Europeans to make contact with the Kikuyu. According to Maryagery Perham, "Kikuyu were exceptionally difficult people to deal with from the very beginning". The difficulty of Kenya people was engendered by the controversial constitutional problem of the white settlers, pushing Kenyans into multi-racial government 'which has been rur up as a bridge between an impossible past and an uncertain future. This is seen in Kimathi's lament thus:

*For four hundred years the oppressor has
exploited and tortured our people. For four
hundred years we have risen and fought
against enslavement of body, mind, and soul.
Our people will never surrender (p.450).*

The Kenyan struggle with their white settlers get worst when a riot in Nairobi erupted and Harry Thuku, an anti Mau Mau, arrested by the KIKUYU central Association (K.C.A.), an ant: Europeans. The riot gave rise to the inauguration of K.C.A, in 1922. It is the K.C.A that metamorphosed into Mau Mau movement, and Jomo Kenyatta became the president of Mai Mau which revolted in 1952. The question now is how could one believe that it was Jomo Kenyatta who turned out to be Kimathi in Ngugi and Mugo's play? The answer is simple -Jomo Kenyatta is the historical hero of Kenyan struggles while Kimathi is Ngugi-Mugo's dramatic hero but all the heros and setting were Kenyan society. Another good answer is also based on the aesthetics of historical struggle. According to Elspeth Huxley who opines that:

*Mau Mau and their oath taking
ceremonies, their ancient fear of
magic, which bound those who were
forced to submission to keep their
oaths (p. 60)*

To place side by side Huxley's experience with the experience in the play*

Kimathi: I seem to know you, who are you? I have been sitting on hot coals of trials and temptations.

Business Executive: You know me you know me, I have stood by you. Wachiuri, it has been a long struggle., my shop at Masiri was an oathing centre (p.67).

History knows Kenyatta Jomo as one who spent fifteen years in Europe and studied the techniques of revolt and practices of medieval witch craft, and worked them into the Mau Mat ritual. In the play one learnt of Kimathi's magical properties:

Boy: How do you really know that it is Kimathi that they have arrested and not another person?

Girl: I myself do not believe it! Because Kimathi would have known of the arrest and escape in time.

Boy: I also heard that he could turn himself into aeroplane.

Girl: That he could walk for a 100 miles on his belly

Boy: How then could they arrest him? Huxley has it that now; Mau Mau has been defeated, because of the core of spiritual hunger and frustration.

Again, the question here is, what kind of frustration defeated Mau Mau? The answer is heard from Kimathi thus:

Kimathi: If I die today, would our people continue the struggle? I would look at the braves killed. But I know that for every traitor they are a thousand patriots..

Gotata - the hooded Gakunia who has betrayed uncountable sons and daughters of this soil.

Judge: Kimathi s/o Wachiuri, you are sentenced to die/ b> handing. You will be hanged by rope until you are deac (p.100).

Also what happened in Ngugi and Mugo's. *The Trial o, Dedan Kimathi* is far from what is obtained in South Africa, where Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bans/ is Dead*, which examines the evil of apartheid. In this play, Athol Fugard used cockroaches to represent the diseases that has infested the political, social and economic life of South Africans. History has always been a tool to creative artist for conflict resolution and development. Athol

Fugard's history of this play is traceable to the 1923 Urban Areas Acts. However in 1918-1919, there was a devastating worldwide influenza that took greater number of South African races. According to Bradbury:

This Act drew attention to the poor conditions of African Urban accommodation since the health of the white neighbors were in danger (p. 58).

It has also been observed that the political perspective has tended to dominate the literary creation in South Africa, although there exist indeed, has always tended to exist - a direct relationship between the two. This explains Nadir; Gordjmer's position quoted by Nwachukwu Harrison that "al: that is written and has ever been written by South Africans is profoundly influenced, at the deepest and least controllable level of consciousness, by the politics of race, because all writers everywhere are shaped by their own particular society."

A question is then asked-what is the relationship between a play written in 1973 and South African Urban Areas Act of 1923. The obvious answer is given by Bradbury's observation that:

In 1921-2, a legislation was made that preserved town for the Whiteman. Africans should be permitted to live in Town so long as they served the needs of white man. An should be removed from town when the Whiteman ceases to be served (p. 101).

The above information shows when and why battle line was drawn between Port Elizabeth and King Williams's Town, This disagreement coincided with Bansi's arrival to Port Elizabeth Town, and his friend Buntu advised him thus:

Buntu: Take my advice and catch that train back to king William's Town. If you need work so bad go knock or; the door of the Mines Recruiting Office. Dig gold for the Whiteman.

Bansi: (Man) I don't want to work on the mines. Many black men get killed when the rocks fall. You can die there (p.104).

It is seen now how 1921 history was found in 1970 drama that is functionally current with the present South African situation. This assertion was further supported by Tejumola who said that "the playwright talks about the past mainly as a way of talking about the present". This is where and why *Sizwe Bansi/ is Dead* is a historical drama which is used as a tool for conflict resolution and societal development. The artistic aesthetics in the above play deals with African setting both historically and dramatically as a reality.

An example of such works in West Africa is Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun and Other plays* whose historical setting is the Moremi legend and Agbekoya uprising of 1968. The Agbekoya uprising deals with ordinary farmers in the Western Nigeria, who rise up and confront the state. These farmers are illiterates who are docile, peace-loving, but suddenly took to arms and begin to fight the government for seven months. This war raged because government neglected them for a long time. Also Moremi is the wife of Oranmiyan in life. When Igbo raiders were attacking the Ife people, it appears the raiders were invincible. A solution for the safety of Ife is that Mormi goes to the god-Esinimrin anc. pledges her child in order that the goddess guides her anc-reveals the secrets of their enemy. However, the goddess agreed to the request in this play, Osofisan recreates past event to reflect Nigeria socio political situation in Nigeria presently. Moremi legend is ageless-several years ago near the Yoruba civilization at Ile-Ife, this is to prove Tejumola:

Who quotes Galileo and St. Joan the historical truth rejected for its implausibility, has the air of an artifact, where as the actual artifacts, the play has an air of truth ... (p.97).

The truthfulness of *Moruntodun* lies in the fact that what created Agbekoya uprising and Moremi legendary art-still happening in the present day Nigeria.

Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* opens with a known recognition of the various biases about the chosen historical setting of the play. Ayondele, E. A. in his *History of Nigeria*, quotes James Johnson to have

expressed shock at what he observed as the crude and religious savagery of the Benin Kingdom. In the above book, Sir Alan Burns, also bias, has also quoted colonial records that saw the Benin raid which was tagged "punitive expedition", as the last important act of the Niger Coast protectorate Government, The attack against Benin Kingdom was also seen as a civilizing mission to a people at the bottom of barbarism, a people who had known nothing better for centuries. These biasness are also featured in the play when Philip refers to Ovonramwen as "a fetish priest-king" (P.3), and Moore calk Benin a "godforsaken city blood" (P.66). According to Ola Rotimi who states that Oba Ovnromwen was "more sinned against than he ever sinned" (XI). Bradbury *R.E.*, records the execution by Ovonramwen of Chiefs who had assassinated his Unwague. Bradbury R.E quoting Ryder A. F.R. also records that a man about to be sacrificed in May 1881, prophesied that the Whiteman would destroy Benin. However, both incidence in the play are combined in the prologue, by which avenue the playwright achieves economy of characters.

The symbolical battle between the British Army and the Benin Warriors however presents obvious instance of the-technical implications of transformation of history into drama. The two warlords-consul-General Moore and Ologbosere, strike the stem of their national symbols and applies his pressure against the other. They (two warlords; became the nearest visual enactment of the battle believed, to be on beyond the immediate stage. Again in making Rotimi's Ovonramwen to merely remove his crown but no; prostrate, as did his historical colleagues, Rotimi has also reworked history to conform to his purpose. One could say that the reason for this break is to allow his king some dignity at a point he apparently was near losing all glory, and also careful not to present to his African audience, ^ drama of their king in total disgrace. For the same reason Obayuwana bravely takes his own life rather than be arrested, the opposite of the ignoble suicide of his historical parallel.

It is obvious from the study that historical drama is a critical work which involves choice of a subject, style, what one want to stress in the essay's subject-matter. However, if one choose, the subject on historical figure, the artist could decide to write on the characters inner conflict, why the character is in conflict with the society as in *Ovonramwen Ngobaisi, Morountudun, Kinjeketile* or areas of the outer history.

In conclusion, the playwright also chooses their position in relation to existing biases. This the playwright does in interpreting history in such a way that the historical works becomes another artistic version of history, not history itself. In this vein, the historical material undergoes different scrutiny so as to suit both the demands of the stage and those of the playwrights.

In the process, the history could be broken up into acts and scenes, thus historical chronology is necessarily tampered with issues of days, events, and places which are all compressed, improvisation, subtractions and additions are made where necessary. Dialogue is created, music, dance rituals etc, are incorporated for particular dramatic effects Obviously, such events which cannot be expressed on stage-are either omitted totally or merely reported. The playwright chooses a plot, tension, suspense, climax, which are introduced for artistic aesthetic effects, and a statement for contemporary society is made where necessary, against the background of the historical events, so as to achieve c, greater plausibility. This means that the statement made against the background of history becomes like the history something true. In the end there exist something of a compromise of the true and the fictitious, something that could be assessed not by rules of history, but only by that of art. This becomes the case with the historical drama in Africa. So history as drama is all aesthetic representations of African realities as Ogunba and Irele observed that:

Drama tends to flourish in a community with an engaging idea or general inferred which bothers on social, political, historical, cultural, artistic and a responsive audience. The society and its ideas must meaningfully combine to create artistic ingenuity to rejuvenate or birth of a new experience (P. 65).

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