

ЖАНРОВИ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ



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EXPLORING THE HISTORICAL CONTENTS OF AFRICAN

DRAMA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF OLA ROTIMI'S

KURUNMI

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Abstract: Drama has always been an enthralling tool of historical communication. Historical drama accentuates some certain and critical events of the past involving literary merit, prosaic, dramatic, rational, rhetorical and historical accuracy. In this sense, reason and emotion are given a critical distinction in the process of telling or re-telling a history particularly when it has to do with a people. Therefore, looking at Rotimi's *Kurunmi* from the historical panorama, this study examines the nexus between drama and history from the African context; and how historical literature can be applied as a pedagogical reference to shape the contemporary world.

Keywords: history, tradition, African drama, African history, tragic conflict, tragic dilemma.

Резюме: Драмата винаги е била увлекателен инструмент за историческа комуникация. Историческата драма акцентира върху определени значими събития от миналото, като използва художествени похвати, прозаична, драматична, рационална, реторическа и историческа точност. В този смисъл се прави съществена разлика между причина и емоция в процеса на предаване или препредаване на дадена история, особено когато тя касае хора. Затова разглеждайки драмата *Kurunmi* на Ротими от историческа перспектива, настоящият текст изследва връзката между драмата и историята в африкански контекст и как историческата литература може да се приложи като педагогическа справка при оформянето на съвременния свят.

Ключови думи: история, традиция, африканска драма, африканска история, трагически конфликт, трагическа дилема

Introduction

Right from the inception of drama in Athens, it has been one of the most important and effective tools of telling or retelling a history. Hence, there has been a sharp disparity between classical and contemporary drama. Regarding the African drama and history, African playwrights have used their writing prowess and the strength of their minds to elucidate the events of the past—reconnoitering the literary contents of African history through drama. However, the indigenous evolution of drama has always been imbedded in African literary studies. Finnegan points out that “How far one can speak of indigenous drama in Africa is not

an easy question. In this it differs from previous topics like, say, panegyric, political poetry, or prose narratives, for there it was easy to discover African analogies to the familiar European forms” (Finnegan, 2012: 1).

The indigenous African drama has always been transmogrified through festival and deities worship similar to the origin of Western drama. In this regard, it has provided an opportunity to evoke a context for the evolution of contemporary African drama. The questions are: what is the role of drama in the society? How do we use drama to provide relevant information? How is drama used as a tool of telling history? and what pedagogical role does it play in the society? Many playwrights have solely drawn inspiration from history and this has improved their creative penmanship—they have brought their environment under focus to reflect the reality of the modern society. Therefore, it is very imperative to provide a strong instrument to examine this crucial branch of art form. Writers have had opportunities to write and examine drama, theatre and traditional festival for critical exploration. Several literary and performance studies have also been further evaluated especially on the aspect of contemporary African drama. Affiah and Osuagwu maintain that:

The position taken so far does not imply that indigenous drama should be appreciated only within its cultural context. It means, however, that for its growth and development, it must concern itself primarily with being relevant, comprehensible and valid aesthetically and in meaning within its cultural context (Affiah and Osuagwu, 2012: 8).

For these reasons, this study essentially locates African drama in the context of literary interpretation and analysis; and how African drama has been affected by Western literary convention—the Africa-Europe dialogue, while its indigenous contents are still absorbingly retained. Here, the concept of African drama is reflected in *Kunrunmi* and the hue of literary development is greatly accentuated. In African concept of dramatic art, several practices have been included in many studies, such as the origination of popular traveling drama convention. For instance, when one talks about the other two literary genres (poetry and fiction), the contemporary African drama examines the theme which is the expressive centre of the sociocultural lifestyle of the Africans before the arrival of the colonial Europe. Thus, “Performers in form of bards and griots still exist, their sonorous voices still reel out fables, tales, myths and legends and other forms of lore’s to their audience (...) And these are still reflected in modern African drama” (Ezeugo, 2016: 164).

Early African drama reflects folktales, oral tradition which is the conventional way of exploring literature in the pre-colonial Africa. Hence, most of the themes of the story are products of historical events and this draws a critical consciousness to the subject of the era.

The traveling theatre in Nigeria, for example has also been part and parcel of the evolution of contemporary drama in Africa. Yakubu explains that “African literature is generally protest-bound (...) writers are social crusaders. They have used their literary works to express their concern over bad governance” (Yakubu, 2015: 77). There is a strong augury that there are several features of African drama that accentuate the beauty of African culture and how Africans lived their lives before the Europeans came. In fact, “African rituals are components of (...) African cultures. We recognize them as such, as culture is taken to mean a body of systems into which lots of human experiences (...) are classified” (Ogugbule, 2017: 71). Many African playwrights therefore derive inspiration from culture, observation of traditional festivals and stories; they also draw wealth of ideas from history—folktales, traditional stories, myth and other oral literary forms to establish that African concept of drama is rich with a strong coordinated code before their encounter with Europeans.

The Influence of Africa on Her Literary Development

Africa is composed of fifty four nations and each of them has its own culture, tradition, languages, dialects, history, norms, tribes and literature—but they have similar features. Most of their literary works are derived from oral tradition: folktales, legends, proverbs and customs. Hence, as times began to proceed, African literature started blending with European literary forms. African literary history is traced to the ancient Egypt when pictures and painting are used to represent something; and along the line Arabic literature began to blend with these ancient codes, ideograms and pictures in which the art of literary writing began to evolve.

Africans had gone through a lot of tribulation in their history through colonial exploitation and slave trade by the European explorers. Development began to occur in African literature when some African writers started rising in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The emergence of these indigenous African writers brought about profound evolution in African literature and history. Thus, the publication of this African literature marked the beginning of an agitation for nationalism and political independence from the colonial rulers. Some have argued that African literature should be mainly written in African languages in order to retain the quality and uniqueness of Africanism. But some have also expressed their iconoclastic views against this idea—they maintained that African literature can be written in any European Language—English and French or any other language inasmuch as it is written by an African author. African authors like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o etc., have played major roles in African literary development. Therefore, their works

have shaped African continent, her socio-political situation and the minds of the African descendants.

Background Information of Ola Rotimi and His African Worldview

If one should talk about the playwrights who have significantly made impact on African society, history and the black race as a whole—being one of the Nigerian notable authors and dramaturgists, Ola Rotimi will be considered as one of them. He was born on 13, April 1938 to Samuel Gladstone Enitan Rotimi, a Yoruba man in the Western region of Nigeria. His full name was Olawale Gladstone Emmanuel Rotimi. But his mother Dorcas Oruene was an Ijaw woman. People are aware of the impact that Ola Rotimi's dramatic texts have made great impacts on the African continent. His plays have been staged in many African nations and numerous other countries especially European countries and America. His works mainly focus on Africa, her people, history, and custom. Many studies in Europe and America have given more attention to his works.

Rotimi has not only published drama but also published some short stories, critical essays, and academic books that reflect African studies, history, society, drama and theatre. He was a great theatre impresario with great creative insights. He has on many occasions presented his dramatic works to the audience under the platform of the University of Ife repertory Theatre Troupe; and they presented their performances in Yoruba Language, Pidgin English and formal English. Among his siblings, Ola Rotimi was the last child. Due to his writing prowess, from 1952-1956, he had once been nicknamed "Shakespeare incarnate" and "the Poet" when he was a student in Boys High School, Lagos, the then capital city of Nigeria. A number of his dramatic texts were transmitted on some Nigerian radio stations and published in prestigious Magazines.

Eventually, he got a scholarship from the Nigerian government to study theatre arts at Boston University, USA, and after that, on a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship he proceeded to Yale University to obtain a Master of Fine Arts in Playwriting and Dramatic Literature. In 1966, his comedy that reflects a socio-political situation titled *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* was selected as the Yale's student play. The major guiding factor of Ola Rotimi's creative acumen was to attain total theatre. He expands the dividing line of conventional Western theatre by accepting not only drama but also mime and movement, dance, song and the African cultural lifestyle. He feels that theatre is supposed to be a nexus between people and their society.

In his theatre, he allows audience-participation in which he is able to engage the English speaking audience that discusses the social situation of the country. When he went to study in

America, it was obvious that his level of intellect was very deep; his self-reliance while writing and teaching was greatly dignified. He had to establish a nexus with his people, his root; and his target audience was Nigerians within the context of their immediate cultural structure. For him, any other type of writing will be unnatural; and inasmuch as the Nigerian people had accepted him the rest of the world would love to watch him. He made use of simple English Language in order to simply pass his message to Nigerian people.

His literary reputation is reflected in the way he applied monosyllabic and disyllabic expressions and the way he inculcated cultural terms, dance and music into his play. He mostly derived inspiration from African history in order to disseminate pedagogical information; he did this because he claimed most African people were not informed about their history by the African historians—and this made the Europeans to inaccurately tell them about their history. Some of his works are: *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* (1977), *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971), *Ovoranwen Nogbaisi* (1974), *If* (1983), *Kunrunmi* (1971), *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988), *Holding Talks* (1979) etc. He also authored many academic books.

Conservatism: The Conflict between the Old and the New Orders

Ola Rotimi presents Kurunmi as a dogmatic and peremptory character that is rigidly committed to traditional values. This is accentuated when the Alaafin intends to change the old order to a new one and Kurunmi becomes arrogantly recalcitrant. Although, Kurunmi is the Generalissimo of the Empire and his role in sustaining the traditional norm and customary practice of the Empire is crucial and epoch-making, but he needs to give room for flexibility. Traditions are made by men; and men are not made by tradition. Kurunmi is dominated by hubris so he allows himself to be destroyed by his hamartia. His weakness plays a major role in destroying him.

Despite the serious deterrent given to him by his fellow chiefs he remains indurated and arrogant. The old tradition states that the Crown prince must die by suicide when the king dies. But this tradition shouldn't be rigid; it can be reviewed and revamped. Hence, Kurunmi sees the idea of Alaafin as the violation of tradition. For this reason, Rotimi presents him as a traditionalist or conservative person who sees change of tradition as desecration. He also presents him as a tragic hero whose little error (hubris) is the source of his doom. Rotimi reflects the conservative social order that has a similar stance with the contemporary society. In this situation, the dominant enlightened ones have experience in the sense that they have considered themselves as the modern elites and they are no longer part of the conservative

society. The old order is considered inapposite as demonstrated by the chiefs who agree with the king's new order without questioning its veracity. In order to preserve the old order, that is why Kurunmi finds it consequential to defend the dying tradition. Thence, Ayodabo postulates that "The discourse of Traditionalism permeates tradition as it refers to a systematic emphasis on the value of beliefs, moral codes, and mores known as traditional values" (Ayodabo, 2016: 69). Kurunmi is a traditionalist who gives more preference for the old order. His interest to defend the dying tradition becomes the prominent theme that leads to the conflict of the text. Kurunmi becomes resolute from the exposition to the resolution of the text; his priority is to protect the tradition of the Yoruba Empire, he stands for what he believes in and dies for it.

Looking at the first scene of the play, one could identify the passion Kurunmi has for tradition and even when the colonial officers tend to interfere and persuade him to consider the change; he refuses. His courageous idiosyncrasy to subjugate colonial officers earns him more respects and this negates the colonial influence in his stance.

His opinion stands for the symbol of the African Yoruba Nation which he assumes has been tampered with and violated due to the neo-colonial elements' support for the new order; and the Alaafin's action, to him is a pervasion of tradition—he expresses his surprise, resentment and grievance.

The people of the land are also used to the tradition and they tend to retain the efficacy of their traditional belief system. This is reflected when the converts hear the rhythm of their traditional song meant for their ancient religion, they unconsciously respond to it. After this event, Rev. Mann meets with Kurunmi in order to make his people respond to the scriptures, he postulates further that "it seems certain that the gospel is doomed to failure in this land" (33). Kurunmi refuses to yield to Rev. Mann's request, but instead, he assaults him in a sarcastic manner and makes him realise that he has been downgrading their tradition. He reflects this as follows: "I go to your country, and I tell your father: 'Mr. So-and-So, from this day on, I want you to give up the ways of your fathers; cast away your manners of worship; neglect your rituals; Mr. So-and-So, snub the shrines of your fathers; betray your gods'" (35).

The response Kurunmi gives to Mr. Mann reflects the reality of cultural value and the strong belief Kurunmi has in tradition. He speaks to his son, Arawole that "the boldness of the white man is the "tragedy of our race and the victory of his own" (36). The character of Kurunmi as a conservative person is made prominent while having a meeting with the king(Alaafin). At the meeting, the king requests his chiefs to swear an oath that after his demise his son will be enthroned as the new king. All the chiefs; Ooni of Ife, Bashorun of Ibadan, Timi of Ede

promise not to do anything contrary to the Alaafin Atiba's wish. But Kurunmi sees this as the violation and pervasion of tradition of the land. He postulates that "whenever an Alaafin dies, his first son (...) must also die with him" (19). As a bold traditional man he utters out his opinion while other chiefs watch in whammy.

In this sense, Kurunmi does not see the death of the king and his son as a catastrophe but as "an honourable ritual of passage which is celebrated by the people as part of their cultural, religious sensibilities. It does not provoke mourning but celebration" (19). When Kurunmi takes his decision, one of the chiefs, Timi of Ede tries to persuade him to acknowledge that "tradition adapts to time" but Kurunmi responds that, "Tradition is tradition. Time may pass but the laws of our father, tested and hallowed by the ways of men, live on. That is tradition" (20). Kurunmi becomes resolute and dogmatic on his decision to maintain the essence of tradition, the philosophy of communal ritual and culture. He opines while explaining his displeasing encounter at the king's palace as follows; "I shall be no party to perversion and disgrace. I picked up my staff and walked out" (17). Azeez maintains that, "Kurunmi, thus, learns at the end of the day that he only knows his own powers, without knowing fully the power of his opponent" (Azeez, 2012:113). However, one can see the socio-political structure of pre-colonial Africa in the manner Rotimi presents its features in the play. The socio-political structure of pre-colonial Africa has been extensively explored by many scholars. Thus, the people of Pre-colonial Africa had their social and political system that helped them in structuring their lives. They had rules, regulations, social organization, political structure, economic organization, effective military system, justice system, an organised police force, and even strict religious institutions and codes. The Africans had kingdoms such as the ancient Egypt, The Oyo Empire, Kush/Nubia, Axum, Ghana, Mali, The Dahomey Kingdom, Songhai, Karnem Bornu, The Zulu Kingdom etc. (Boateng, 1978). The people were able to maintain law and order, and they had a very organized political structure and major principalities that ruled and made decision. This can be seen in the way Alaafin of Oyo presides over a meeting with his chiefs and changes the tradition he feels is obsolete.

The Tragic Conflict in *Kurunmi*

According to Aristotle's concept of tragedy he explicates that a tragic hero must be of noble status; he is always good but with a minor weakness which is always the main source of his doom. He further posits that a tragic conflict is when conflict happens where it is not expected. In *Kurunmi*, Rotimi presents the conflict when there is a change in the constitution that the Crown Prince will no longer die after the king's demise. Kurunmi insists that the

tradition must stand and it must not change. The king eventually dies and the Crown Prince is enthroned. Kurunmi is absent at the coronation which is a big dishonour to the throne and tradition. This is where Kurunmi's character becomes incongruous because he has also become a violator of the tradition he tends to defend.

The new Alaafin Adelu tries to preclude the conflict but Kurunmi, because of his conservative nature and excessive arrogance, calls for war. Tragic conflict becomes dignified when the war breaks out between Oyo, Ibadan, and Ijaye warriors. Kurunmi's territory is Ijaye and he commands all the military affairs of the Empire from there. The conflict is fuelled by hubris and inability to see some positive result in establishing the new order. He becomes rigid and inconsiderate and this leads to a greater tragedy. If he had listened to advice of his fellow chiefs, there wouldn't have been war. Therefore, tragic conflict becomes imminent in this situation. Oso maintains that "In defence of tradition, Kurunmi drags his people into a ruinous war. In the war, the Egba advise and mount pressure on the Ijaye to take the risky venture of crossing River Ose to attack Ibadan and her allies" (Oso, 2018: 45).

The stick-to-it-iveness of Kurunmi to retain his traditional view does not only lead to war between Oyo, Ibadan and Ijaye but also creates a tragic tension in the social order of Yoruba nation. The call to war emerges when the new king sends a message to Kurunmi to ask the reason for his absence at his coronation but Kurunmi maintains that the "supreme lord is dead. How can a dead king expect me to come to his crowning?" (26). Kurunmi then disdainfully refers to the new king as a child. This action is not only an absolute dishonour and vituperation to Alaafin but also to the throne and tradition he tries to defend. In African context, A king is a king, it does not matter how young or old he is, the tradition demands that he should be accorded due respect and honour.

It is a grievous flippancy to the office of Alaafin who is the royal custodian of the Oyo and Yoruba race. Thence, Kurunmi who claims to be a custodian of tradition begins to invite war. After this disdainful action, the messengers open the calabashes that contain symbolic messages; and this indicates that Kurunmi should choose between war and peace; and Kurunmi chooses war. There are three components of symbolic message in the three calabashes: One is Bullet, the second is gunpowder while the third is the symbolic object of peace. Kurunmi chooses the bullet and the gunpowder which symbolise war. While expressing his dignified indignation and arrogance he declares that "bull-frog that rivals the size of the elephant will burst" (29). Therefore, Rotimi presents Kurunmi as a traditionalist whose opinion leads him to unnecessary war. As Aristotle explains, that a tragic hero must possess a godlike character but with a slightest error that will destroy him. Kurunmi displays

an overbearing conduct and a high level of arrogance—he consequently pays for it excruciatingly.

The Personal Contribution of Kurunmi to His Own Doom: The Tragic Dilemma and the Stage of Finality

Aristotle makes it clear that every tragic hero will one way or the other personally contribute to his own doom. Kurunmi personally contributes to his own doom because of hubris. The war degenerates when the warriors of Kurunmi sent to Ilorin are murdered. The killing of these twenty warriors leads to the full-fledged war. In his eagerness for battle Kurunmi spreads charm powder that brings good fortune on his soldiers and sends them to Oyo. Hence, he begins to sense danger when his warriors are killed by Oyo and Ibadan warriors—this is reflected when Ogunkoroju explains that “out of a whole five hundred [warriors] only five (...) came back” (64).

Kurunmi becomes nonplussed and his subconscious mind draws his attention to a prospective defeat. He thinks in his mind as follows: “is Ogunmola sending greetings from Ibadan camp. Over and count the heads of your men in the ashes of my fireplace” (65). He finds himself in an insidious state of mind when he becomes aware of the killing of his soldiers. Another most heart-piercing report is the Egba warriors who join forces with him to fight the war have all perished in the River Ose. This makes Kurunmi have some retrospective human conflict that makes him ask himself a question “am I in the wrong in this war”? (83). At the end, he becomes aware of the unavoidable defeat and to save himself from shame, he commits suicide by taking poison. He instructs his lieutenants to bury him at the bank of River Ose where he is conquered. In fact, “His alliance with the Egba proves disastrous, culminating in the defeat of the Ijaye people in the hands of Ibadan. The Ijaye record heavy casualties in the war” (Oso, 2018: 45).

He shows his pain in his expression that “when a leader of men has led his people to disaster what remains of his present life is but a shadow of his proud past, then, it is time to be leader no more” (93). At the concluding sequence of the play, Kurunmi accepts his fate and takes responsibility for his ruination. *Kurunmi* reflects the concept of tragic hero as conceptualised by Aristotle; the elements such as catharsis, tragic flaw, peripeteia, anagnorisis, doom, pathos are all present in *Kurunmi* and this accentuates the significant nexus between African and Western drama concept and theory of literary tragedy. However, “Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* as well as Kurunmi’s suicide reflects the cultural politics informed by the stylization of historical material or historical reconstruction of Négritude” (Ikyoive, 2016: 96).

Meanwhile, Kurunmi finds himself in a state of tragic dilemma. According to Aristotle, a tragic hero finds himself in a tragic dilemma when he is caught in-between two difficult decisions and he's expected to choose one—a choice between crossing the river or to be left alone by his soldiers. He therefore finds himself between the devil and the deep blue sea. Kurunmi has great knowledge and experience about the art of war, but he lacks ability to tame his ego and excessive arrogance.

He chooses to cross River Ose as his decision of tragic necessity—unfortunately the river becomes red. All the sixty thousand soldiers with him die including all his five sons. Kurunmi finds it difficult to stand the shame; and the Ibadan warriors are moving closer to get him apprehended. In African society, hero prefers death to shame. They commit suicide when they realise that their integrity is at stake. Thus, Kurunmi commits suicide. He fulfills his tragic vision; he never draws back until he reaches his final tragic destination. Affiah maintains that “The tragic action once initiated must run its full course. It is irreversible (...), hero resists everything and every effort aimed at persuading him to abandon his tragic vision (Affiah, 2013: 51).

Conclusion

Ola Rotimi reflects the coloration of historical indispensability of African society in the pre-colonial Africa through *Kurunmi*. He explicates the political feud and rivalries that usually take place among the African superpowers and how conflicts usually evolve and lead to tragic war when it is not appropriately managed. This study therefore explores the conflict between the old and new orders; the traditional and the contemporary situation of Africanism. The sitch divulges the fact that African society had also been having conflicting issues that degenerate to war in their classical times. The study delineates the efficacious components of African history, political past, and the nexus between drama and history within the context of Africa-Europe dialogue. However, the protagonist of the play is presented as a victim of fate because he fails to handle his hamartia—and his Achilles' heel makes him vulnerable to woe. Thus, the play has also accentuated the African political development and civilization in the pre-colonial times; and the play has been a good source of historical account in which the idea of pre-colonial African society is well told dramatically. So, the efficacy of this study is that, it has explained the essence of African history through the lenses of drama. As Rotimi has crystalised the reality of the past, the play still remains very relevant in this present African society where political pandemonium and conflict are prevalent. Further studies that could

examine the present political conflicts in most of the African nations, could be conducted using this same play.

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