



Symbolist and Naturalist Readings of African Drama

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Abstract - This article looks into symbolism and naturalism as reading strategies in African drama. Within the field of theory, critical emphasis has not been put on the possibility to read traditional and modern drama as symbolically and naturally oriented. The dialectic of reading and interpretation involves African colonial and neocolonial experiences as the main vectors of African drama but the critical tendency to depict with realism political history has not been elucidated with the light of symbolism and naturalism as theories of drama. This study attempts to locate the dialectic of reading and interpreting symbolism and naturalism in African context as vectors that should guide critical interpretation. To what extent does African indigenous drama read through symbolism as culture-based genre and how does African history, specifically colonialism and neocolonialism contribute to the framing of Symbolism and naturalism as major critical theories in African theatre studies?

Key words: Reading, text, history, symbolism, naturalism, theory, interpretation.

Résumé - Cet article examine le symbolisme et le naturalisme comme stratégies de lecture dans le théâtre africain. Dans le domaine de la théorie, l'accent critique n'a pas été mis sur la possibilité de lire le théâtre traditionnel et moderne africain comme orienté vers le symbolisme et le naturalisme. La dialectique de la lecture et de l'interprétation implique généralement les expériences coloniales et néocoloniales africaines comme principaux vecteurs du théâtre africain mais la tendance critique à interpréter avec réalisme l'histoire politique n'a pas été élucidée à la lumière du symbolisme et du naturalisme en tant que théories du théâtre. La présente étude tente de localiser la dialectique de la lecture et de l'interprétation du symbolisme dans le contexte africain comme vecteurs qui devaient guider l'interprétation critique. Dans quelle mesure le théâtre traditionnel africain se lit à travers le symbolisme comme un genre basé sur la culture et comment l'histoire africaine, en particulier le colonialisme et néocolonialisme, contribue-t-elle à l'usage du symbolisme et du naturalisme comme théories critiques majeures dans les études théâtrales africaines ?

Mots clés : Lecture, texte, histoire, symbolisme, naturalisme, théorie, interprétation.

1. Introduction

Many critics have offered theoretical approaches to African drama without showing the contributions of symbolism and naturalism in the construction of meaning. Biodun Jeyifo asserts that post colonialism is the only theory that meaningfully reads modern African drama. His argument is that post colonialism responds as a deconstructive theory to debunk "dominant Eurocentric or colonialist perspectives from a powerful, imperializing scholastic western critical orthodoxy deployed in debates on the existence or non-existence of indigenous African theatre tradition."¹ Michael Etherton opines that

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¹ Biodun Jeyifo, *Modern African Drama* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), p. 459.



no critical theory is suitable to interpret indigenous African drama.² These statements seem to establish the fact that African theatre is not theoretically intelligible to be interpreted with theatre theory. I disagree with such critical tenet and suggest that drama is symbolically and naturally oriented. For the two critics, all critical analyses should be theory-free, an idea that overlooks the implications of theory in the construction of meanings of African drama. J. C. de Graft holds that “the dynamics of dramatic development” is informed by “the cumulative result of over five hundred years of the subjection of African cultural system to colonialism, the most ruthless forms of domination and exploitation.”³ Alpha I. Sow declares: “After a period of direct colonial domination during which the values of its cultural heritage were denied, Black Africa seeks to assert its personality, to resist the intellectual control of the Western powers [...]”⁴ These approaches to the development of African literature do not offer an elucidating explanation about the contribution of symbolism and naturalism in the reading and articulation of African drama as theories of theatre in Africa. It follows that aspects of reading strategies of how colonial history shaped and oriented African drama towards naturalist movement is missing. That is why I propose to re-examine in the first part of the article, African drama as cultural community-based, using symbolism as methodological approaches. In the second part, I will read African drama with naturalist approach, showing how it is politically oriented and historically grounded. I specifically want to address the question how does critical theory rest on politics and history in African theatre studies? My methodological approach will be metacriticism.

2. An African Variant of Symbolism: Theory and Reading Strategy

Symbolism is a theory of theatre that reads in literature the interconnection between objects, facts, ideas or entities and their allegoric or metaphoric meanings in the spiritual realm. Symbols allude to deeper or transcendental realities that go beyond the physical world to refer to deeper metaphysical realities according to their properties, so that the words of action and facts may be explored by analogy using symbols. J. E. Cirlot states:

Symbolism *adds* a new value to an object or an act, without thereby violating its immediate or ‘historical’ validity. Once it is brought to bear, it turns the object or action into an ‘open’ event: symbolic thought opens the door on to immediate reality for us, but without weakening or invalidating it; seen in this light the universe is no longer sealed off, nothing is isolated inside its

2 Michael Etherton, *The Development of African Drama* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1982), p. 35.

3 J. C. de Graft, “Roots in African Drama and Theatre” pp. 1-25 in Eldred Durosimi Jones, ed., *African Literature Today: Drama in Africa*, No 8 (: London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1976), p. 19.

4 Alpha I. Sow, “Prolegomena” pp. 9-31 in *Introduction to African Cultures: General Aspects* (Paris: UNESCO, 1979), p. 30.



own existence: everything is linked by a system of correspondences and assimilations.⁵

The point made here is that symbolism is grounded in the interpretation of symbols, which are present as signs, ideas, objects, facts or entities and their meanings. Symbolism is an important critical theory to be used in trying to understand African drama. I use critical theory to mean a plausible set of acceptable principles offered to explain the birth and development of African theatre. African traditional drama rests essentially on elements of oral tradition namely rituals, festivals, myths, legends, and figurative language (proverbs, riddles and folktales) which are not to be ignored in the formulation of theory and interpretation. Festival, ritual and myth in African drama reflect the transcendental aspects of performance which contain codified messages that need the priest's initiated knowledge of the mystic world to decipher their symbolic messages. Indigenous theatre performance uses symbols and symbolic language to impart meaning.

Despite the salient features of symbols in indigenous drama performance, some critics who approach it have ignored them. Some books have been written with the intention to meet that need, but theoretical approaches offered have left interpretive gaps with regard to theory. One major book that guides theory is Michael Etherton's *The Development of African Drama*. The author sought to solve the problem of critical theory in African drama through the examination and interpretation of essays and plays that sustain the canonical works of African theatre scholars but didn't achieve the goal. What is missing in his book is the formulation of a critical theory that can be used to understand and interpret African drama. Etherton's reading does not clearly formulate a critical theory on which a reader can build meaning. He was expected to elucidate the critical theory orientation that applies to African indigenous drama and modern drama. He has only shown that African drama has emerged as the heir of triple cultural heritages: indigenous traditions, western Christian civilization and mid-west Islamic waves,⁶ without specifically naming out the theory that reads comprehensively African drama and theatre. Etherton's thematic approaches to indigenous African drama has left out its symbolic dimension. He declares:

[African] drama may well become a key methodology for developing thought across a board front... The process of turning a problem of social analysis into a play is achievable but complex. Experiments so far have resulted in only limited achievements both in Africa and elsewhere....This process requires skills, but at the same time a demystification of those skills.⁷

⁵ J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. xiv

⁶ Michael Etherton, op. cit., pp. 35.

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 354-355.



First, Etherton does not show why pre-colonial indigenous drama essentially rests on symbolism. His approaches to what he calls “ritual traditions for drama and theatre” are vague and not theoretically based. In the first chapter of the book titled “traditional performance in contemporary societies he asserts:

If much tradition-based critical analysis of African drama is limited by focusing exclusively on the artistic product and omitting its social and economic organization from the discussion, so too are a number of sociological and anthropological studies of African societies severely limited by their exclusion to the plastic and performing arts from their analyses. The sociologist’s definition has been narrowed down to include that which can be assessed scientifically: descent groups, lineages, kingship patterns, the functioning of magic and religion...⁸

This statement means Etherton acknowledges the insufficiency of theoretical approaches to indigenous African drama which he promised to solve in his book and yet the book ends with no theoretical examination of indigenous African theatre. He limits his analysis to generic definitions of drama and tradition, proceeds to show that African traditional societies were attached to their customs and concludes that “the phenomenon of African drama developing out of traditional art is complex...” and in the various critical approaches, there are limitations manifest in the various methodologies...⁹

For me I think that the major theory that best applies to the indigenous African drama is symbolism and naturalism. I will discuss symbolism in this section and naturalism in the next. A look at symbolist movement in European drama can help make the point. In European drama, Symbolism was a 19th century drama movement that sought to go beyond the natural empirical description of events in literature and focus on metaphorical and allegorical meanings of facts. Reacting against the rationalism and materialism that had come to dominate Western European culture, symbolism proclaimed the validity of pure subjectivity and the expression of an idea over a realistic description of the natural world. Marvin Carlson in *The Theories of Drama: A Historical and Critical Survey* opines that that Symbolism is “the evocation of thoughtful life” which “touches the depth of human condition. Symbolic drama gives suggestion instead of reality. A symbol instead of an imitation.”¹⁰ The symbolic interpretation incorporates the poetic aesthetics, conveys the conviction that reality is best expressed through symbols because it seeks to understand nature through metaphysical medium of communication. The symbolic approach seeks to touch realities that are not apparent in the physical world, and this becomes a central tenet of the movement. How man relates to

⁸ Michael Etherton, op. cit, p. 35.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 41.

¹⁰ Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, From Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 303.



gods can be understood only through symbolic approaches to spiritual realm. In African context, symbolism regulates and governs drama.

I will give specific domains where symbolic understanding of life is reflected in dramatic literature, both oral and written. First, traditional folk life: religious festivals, ritual dances, folktales, creation myth stories, proverbs and popular sayings in day-to-day exchange talk, dressing styles and other cultural practices are replete with symbols. One would say that life in African culture rests on symbols and allegories. In traditional Africa, traditional drama was deeply entrenched in the cultural practices of the folk communities. From this perspective, symbols are inherent to the folk life of African communities and their theatrical practices.

Several reasons can be advocated to sustain the necessity of using symbolism as the main theoretical tool for understanding African indigenous or traditional drama. The first reason is that African indigenous drama emerged out of rituals, festivals, myths legends, folk life and language. Such drama is symbolic in the main and the critical theory that best suits with its interpretation and understanding is symbolism.

Drama in traditional Africa rests on a body of symbols and signs that metaphorically stand for values, entities, facts and events that are meaningful to the indigenous population who practice and use them as remedy to approach life. Such symbols like eating the new yam on the new moon, purification rites, harvest festivals, ritual murder, wrestling contests, dirge and eulogy, initiation into adulthood, funeral dances to mention but a few, bear symbolic meaning. In West Africa, these symbols are the backbone of African indigenous drama that dominated the theatre field before the advent of European colonialism. Theodore Hatlen shares this logic when he says: "It is in such rituals that we find the basic elements of drama – music, song, dance, costuming, mimetic action and communal performance. Religious ritual expresses the deepest needs and longings of the people and associating them with the supernatural". Ritual is used as a communicative mode to talk with supernatural forces to expand human spirit and reach metaphysical realm. Myth is used as an interpretative medium to explain life mysteries. For instance, creation myth stories give tentative answers to the origin of the world, the meanings of life and death. Festivals are used as celebratory modes to commemorate the gathering of the tribes, rejoice over abundant harvest, assess human values and commune within the same community. Talking especially about ritual, this communicative mode is used to perform sacrifices and offer prayers to deities in moments of trouble, sickness, to conjure evil predictions and to seek protection from them. Ritual is also used to exorcise evil spirit or to attempt to cure mental disease. Behind the symbolic act of ritual stands a strong faith in the divine intervention of transcendental forces that traditional communities



resort to as their ultimate refuge when human efforts fail to yield the expected solutions to human predicaments. J. C. De Graft corroborates this critical stand by saying:

One must never forget those threats posed by forces that lie deep within our souls (as some would put it), forces like pride and anger, greed and lust, jealousy and fear...It was the awareness of these many threats that led 'primitive' man to those rituals of apprehension, propitiation, purification, and exorcism of which impersonation was often such a cardinal feature. It was this same awareness that animated the drama in such widely different cultures as those of fifth-century Greece (BC) and medieval Europe. Indeed, it is impossible to read accounts of the origins and development of Ancient Greek drama and theatre, or medieval European drama, without being deeply impressed by this fact.¹¹

It would be short-sighted to theorize on African drama without taking a holistic connotation of symbolism. All traditional performances shelter symbolic connotation beyond their physical appearances. Symbolism governs life and its meaning in Africa and drama is one of the major ways in which this symbolic interpretation and understanding of life finds expression.

The second reason why symbolism stands out as a suitable theory to understand and interpret African traditional drama is that the symbolic ingredients find ways of expression in the day-to-day language through the use of proverbs, puns, riddles and imagery talks. Such imagery language borrows words, names, diction and illustrations from animal kingdom, ancestral world, and human experience to talk about realities that apply to human condition. For instance, Wole Soyinka extensively quotes from Yoruba proverbs in his plays to establish the symbolic dimension of proverbs which allude to deeper social realities. For instance, in *Kongi's Harvest*, he quotes the following proverbs: "the pot that will eat fat, its bottom must be scorched. The squirrel that will long crack nuts, its footpad must be sore. The sweetest wine has flowed down the tapper's shattered shins".¹²In these proverbs, squirrel, the pot and the wine are used as symbols to designate human being. These proverbs mean that in the life of a human being, success is predicated upon time-consuming hard work and every desired end exacts its price. Here, symbols are metaphorically employed to utter codified strong moral lessons and express ethical philosophical outlook. In *Swamp Dwellers*, he quotes proverbs like: "Every god shakes the beggar by hand"¹³, "The hands of the gods are unequal".¹⁴ These two proverbs mean that human beings are subjected to the unpredictable whims of the gods who hold power of life and death on humans. This was a strong belief among pre-colonial

¹¹ J. C. De Graft, "Roots in African Drama and Theatre" pp. 1-25 in Eldred Durosimi Jones, ed., *African Literature Today, No 8 Drama in Africa* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1976), p. 4

¹² Wole Soyinka, *Kongi's Harvest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 1.

¹³ Wole Soyinka, *The Swamp Dwellers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 35.

¹⁴ Ibidem.



African societies. Ola Rotimi adjoins this ideology by creating fate oriented story in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* in which Adewale is doomed to fulfill the gods' predictions by killing his father and marrying his mother. He illustrates this tragic fate through a proverb quoted by Baba Fakunle the Soothsayer to Adewale: "The snail may try, but it cannot cast off its shell"¹⁵. The snail and its shell are symbolically alluding to Adewale who cannot escape from the predictions of the gods, the very manipulators of human life. If one refers to African communities every culture is predicated on the belief in ritualistic mode of communication with the deities or the ancestors. The Igbo proverb "When a man says yes, his chi or personal god also says yes"¹⁶ is quoted by Chinua Achebe to explain how human fate is interconnected with the divine will. Thus, symbolism and symbolical interpretation of life are inherent to African traditional life.

A third reason why symbolism is relevant as a theory in approaching African drama is the fact that dreams and their symbolic interpretations occupy a central place in African traditional life and also the fact that many African playwrights have explored that reality in their plays. Sleep and dreams are part and parcel of human life and in Africa the interpretation of dreams and visions rely heavily on symbols. Elders endowed with traditional wisdom resort to symbols, images, metaphors and allegories to give tentative meanings to dreams. It is believed that dreams come in the form of codified messages that needs to be decoded and put in meaningful words through the symbolic analysis of facts that occurred in dreams. Even in modern societies dreams remain mysterious. That is why their interpretations strongly rely on symbolism and cultural beliefs. Sigmund Freud's attempt to use psychoanalysis as a theory to interpret dreams has shed a lot of light on the functioning mode of human sub consciousness and its relationship with the world of dreams but there are still imprecisions as to the prophetic aspects of dreams and their fulfillment. As an adjunct of African drama, traditional wisdom uses symbolism to decipher possible meanings of dreams and has established in communities, belief systems that use these symbols to give meanings to dreams. For instance, it is believed among many communities in West Africa that rainwater in a dream is a good omen presaging good luck, happy events like the finding of employment or marriage; while termites generally presage bad omen like destruction, accident, or even death. It is also believed that eating in dreams has bad symbolic meaning as it is specifically associated to initiation into witchcraft and sorcery.

¹⁵ Ola Rotimi, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 40.

¹⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), p.40.



Modern African dramatists recapture beliefs and their culture-related understandings in plays. For instance, in Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*, Gunema a Head of State has had one of his subjects executed because he had a nightmare about an impending danger in his country and concluded about a potential coup that this citizen was allegedly believed to be plotting. He didn't have proofs of the realist fulfillment of the dream but relied on the symbolic interpretation of images he saw that was decoded as a coup being plotted against him. Equally important is the roles of dreams and their symbolic meanings in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*. In Ngugi's *I Will Marry When I Want*, dreams are presented as an unrealizable belief, the belief of Kiguunda that his daughter Gathoni will marry Kioi's son John, once he agrees to mortgage his piece of land and organizes a church wedding. Unfortunately, this belief, the Ngugi's show, is a mere dream as John abandons Gathoni after impregnating her. Symbolically that dreamlike story represents the exploitative strategies of western imperialists who use neocolonial strategies like foreign aid and structural adjustments to exploit African countries. In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, the dream of the protagonist Anowa reads both like a psychological fulfillment of her strong desire for children and a metaphor of trans-Atlantic slave trade to which Africa has been subjected for many centuries. Anowa narrates her dream thus:

I dreamt that I was a big, big woman. And from my insides were huge holes out of which poured men, women and children. And the sea was boiling and steaming. And as it boiled, it threw out many, many giant lobsters, each of whom as it fell turned into a man or woman, but keeping its lobster head and claws. And they rushed to where I sat and seized the men and women as they poured out of me, and they tore them apart, and dashed them on the ground and stamped upon them¹⁷.

Here Ama Ata Aidoo has Anowa tell a dream she had, but has left to the reader to construct its symbolic meaning from the main story of the play. I personally look at the meaning of this dream from Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Anowa is a barren woman whose marriage with Kofi Ako is running the risk of tearing apart due to the lack of children. Her dream in which she sees herself as a big woman from whose insides ran bid holes out of which poured out men, women and children may be the subconscious fulfillment of the strong desire to bear children. But this dream can also have a deep symbolic meaning in which the protagonist Anowa's childbirth stands for a prophetic human and socio-economic recovery of Africa after ravages of centuries of slavery and colonialism. Delia Kumavie offers the following explanation:

In this passage, Anowa associates herself with the traumatic experience of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which occurred in an earlier time in history.

¹⁷ Ama Ata Aidoo, *Anowa* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1965/2003), p. 71



She maps slavery and the slave trade onto her physical being as though she had a personal experience of it. Anowa's dream positions her at the heart of the slave trade as the woman out of whom the men, women, and children are born, and whose progeny are seized and destroyed. The sea both represents Anowa's loss and separation from the past and connects her to the roots of pan-Africanism. Indeed, Anowa's return to this imagery in her own moment of personal crisis foregrounds the depth of the diasporic connection that Aidoo pursues in her subsequent work.¹⁸

This critical interpretation which consists in viewing Anowa as a symbolic representation of Africa which has been the suffer head of slavery when her children were captured, but whose future recovery is possible. Bearing in mind that Ama Ata Aidoo is a Pan-Africanist writer, it is plausible to infer that the men and women coming out of Anowa are symbols of present and future generations, the manpower of the continent who will work for its development. As a matter of fact, approaching her play from a symbolist perspective is realistic. So, approaching African drama through symbolism enables the critic to offer deeper and broader perspectives on both traditional drama and modern drama.

The fourth reason for the need of Symbolism in approaching African drama is that majority of the first and second generations of African playwrights have turned to traditional folk life with its operative modes to reconstruct life in pre-colonial Africa. They redefined African identity by creating the theory that asserts black identity as valuable, precious, and original. Several playwrights have recaptured oral tradition as first hand material to redefine Africans' identity. Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* highlight the organization of Yoruba kingdoms with hierarchized structures, festival dances and cultural practices. Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* describes cultural life and social organization in the Benin Kingdom before the colonial incursion. The play underscores the ability of African people to live in an organized community, manage political affairs and develop democratic institutions. Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* also displays well organized socio-political life in Tanzania before the colonial penetration.

Another reason why symbolism suits as theory in approaching African drama is the presence of magical realism in drama. Magical realism is the belief in the potency of magic as effective tool to obtain a desired result. The desired results range from change of situation from bad to good or vice-versa, the protection against misfortune, or the access to good luck. According to African traditional belief system, magic can also be used to make money, to get somebody's favour, to succeed in an exam. But it can also be used for negative ends, by for instance harming a person by causing them to become sick or

¹⁸ Delia Kumavie, "Ama Ata Aidoo's Woman-Centered Pan-Africanism: A Reading of Selected Works" pp. 57-68 in Amina Mama and Hakima Abbas, eds., *Feminist Africa, Issues 20, 2015 Pan-Africanism and Feminism* (African Gender Institute: University of Cape Town), p. 61.



invalid. Magical realism is abundantly present both in real life and in dramatic literature. In many communities in West Africa, it is believed that festival drama and ritual drama are performed side by side with exorcism, the chasing of evil spirit through incantatory recitation of prayers. It is also believed that magical lotions or substances can make a woman fertile. Magical realism is also missing in Etherton's treatment of theory. I prefer using magical realism in this text because this terminology better describes the manifestation of the supernatural which comes to the surface structure of humans lives and becomes part of their living experience. Whatever the context in which magical realism operates, many symbols are used to perform action. From the gathering of items needed for its performance to the very results to be obtained, symbolism operates to hide aspects of its significance to the common spectator. In an earlier article, I explained that dramatic symbols transpire in Act Two, Scene two of Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu*. For instance, when King Baabu goes to consult an Oriental Mystic and a Marabout because he believes in the potency of magic to perpetuate his rule.¹⁹ Several symbols are used by Soyinka to explain deeper realities in the belief system of African politicians. When Baabu goes to the Marabout, every item prescribed has symbolic meaning. His kingship is metaphorically labelled a dynasty, because, he wants to secure the throne for him and his descendants alone. In the process of the Marabout's divination, mythical objects are presented and their meaning revealed to the king.

Marabout [...] Baabu must sit on the skin of a freshly sacrificed goat for forty days and forty nights. A spotless white he-goat. A new one will be sacrificed each day and Baabu must consume its testicles. Nobody whose eyeballs are red must come near the palace. No red kola nuts, only white or yellow. (KB: 60)

The skin of a freshly sacrificed goat and the act of sitting on it for forty days and forty nights symbolically mean securing the throne for forty years with the magical potency that the sacrifice of the goat will procure. Consuming the goat's testicles is believed to increase the king's ability to resist foreign attacks and white kola nuts are also symbols of life and prosperity. King Baabu is further requested to sacrifice a spotless white he-goat (KB: 60), to provide forty hunchbacks and forty albinos who must be buried alive with padlocks through their lips (KB: 62). The Marabout explains this through a simile, "just as the camel's hump stores the power of water that sustains the camel over long distances in the arid desert, the human hump can do even better by sustaining the king's throne for many years" (KB: 63). Considering how magical realism

¹⁹ Damlegue Lare, "Political Consciousness and Social Reconstruction: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*" pp. 165-185 in *Geste et Voix: Revue Scientifique*, No 17, Juin 2013, p. 181.



operates in African drama, it is therefore essential to approach it from symbolist theoretical perspective.

Through symbolism one can understand that magical realism seeks to effect the course of action through the involvement of the supernatural. Man searching to expand his spirit reaches out for security and protection and looks into the spiritual worlds elements of reference that can help him reach his full potential. Playwrights with magical realism ideology have theorized on history and society as continuously undergoing a cyclic turn of fate. Man in such dramas becomes a mere pawn in the hands of the gods or fate. This theoretical outlook has far reaching implications in the understanding of African traditional mindset where there is a strong belief that human beings entertain ontological and cosmological relationships with ancestors and deities. Wole Soyinka, Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele are important voices in the development of magical realism. In *Theatre in Africa* they defend the thesis that magical realism is inherent to African indigenous life. Soyinka's critical books *Myth, Literature and the African World* and *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* sustain this thesis. My premise here is that magical realism in African drama entails a defacement of the scrounging masses who cannot compete with these domineering gods, spirits and kings. They [the masses] must continually pay allegiance to their gods and appease them with enormous sacrifices. But magical realism has a symbolical and more profound meaning because playwrights like Femi Osofisan and Ola Rotimi use the interaction between humans and gods respectively in *No More the Wasted Breed* and *The Gods Are Not to Blame* to talk about the European colonizers shaping Africans destiny and present the African present condition of economic dependence on European nations as an inescapable fate that history imposed on Africans. This theoretical interpretation also transpires in their critical essays, especially Rotimi's "The Attainment of Discovery: Efua Sutherland and the Evolution of Modern African Drama" and Osofisan's *The Nostalgic Drum: Essays on Literature, Drama and Culture*.

Another dimension of magical realism is seen when ritual becomes a type of language. Rituals are normally operational on symbolic and metaphoric levels. But when rituals are enacted by human beings in theatrical representations rituals must, as language, be grounded in social and cultural matrices of human lived experience. The meaning of this argument is that in theatrical representation, ritual symbolism blasts its symbolic shell, merges with concrete social, cultural and historical matrices and becomes specialized to selected, formalized, repeated and enacted human activities with an undercurrent on human intentionality.

3. Naturalism and Realism in the Context of African Drama



The second theory which in my opinion best suits with African drama is naturalism. Naturalism is a literary theory and movement that seeks to depict in theatre works human living conditions as close to reality as possible. As Theodore Hatlen put it, "naturalism is an exaggerated form of realism".²⁰In other words, naturalism is an advanced form of realism. In European context, naturalism was a movement in late 19th-century drama that aimed to replace the artificial romantic style with accurate depictions of ordinary people in plausible situations. In attempting to create a perfect illusion of reality, playwrights and directors rejected dramatic conventions that had existed since the beginnings of drama.²¹In African context, naturalism is not ascribed within a specifically historical period, but it has taken form and developed as a literature of African consciousness since the time after colonial rule began until the present time.

I will give four reasons why African drama needs to be read with naturalist theoretical outlook. Firstly, modern African drama developed as a realistic literature that chronicles Africa's historical struggles with the European colonialism and developed a consciousness that dislocates western imperialist discourse as the center of cultural production and knowledge. As a matter of fact, in African context, naturalist movement has been both keen observer of the socio-political development of African history and the chronicler of the continent's predicament. Writing about African history offers the playwright the ability to help the readers understand the past. History becomes reference and playwrights use that reference to frame ways of understanding the present. They assess the continent's present condition in the light of history, and theorize about a better future. Naturalism critically assesses historical drama as a medium for rewriting Africa by recasting the continent's identity and aspirations. Drama being creative literature, ideas about ways to avoid past mistakes can be pondered over in plays and on stage. On this issue, David Kerr has this to say: "It [Naturalism] would also entail describing the attempts made by colonial educators [African playwrights] to mobilize African communities through a variety of imposed or transformed, indigenous arts."²² To mobilize here means to prepare intellectually people to know their history and be willing to change. The critical analysis has an important implication on the naturalist reading of plays. The implication is that naturalism entertains close relationship with history and politics and the main objective is to read historical plays as efforts to historical education to readers and spectators through a realistic

²⁰ Theodore Hatlen, *Orientation to the Theatre* (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1962), p. 157.

²¹ Marvin Carlson, *Theories of Drama: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 158.

²² David Kerr, "Art as Tool, Weapon or Shield?: Art for Development Seminar, Harare" pp. 486-493 in Biodun Jeyifo, ed., *Modern African Drama* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), p. 486.



depiction of socio-political reality. Naturalism as a critical theory would read African drama as a realist literature that articulates the colonial brutality highlighting the tragic aspect of the encounter where Africa became the suffer head with the loss of its human and economic resources. Plays in that perspective include Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* Athol Fugard's *My Children! My Africa!* and *People Are Living There*. These plays portray with realism the colonial brutality and the expected violent reactions of Africans who opposed with resistance the colonial penetration. Reading these plays with naturalist inclination will prepare the cultural memory of the reader to reflect on African past critical moments and better apprehend the continent's present condition.

Secondly, in African context, naturalism has gone beyond the historical documentary recording of past frustrations to project the possible and the plausible picturesque orientations of socio-political life and events. Drama has been used to anticipate the future. Playwrights have creatively projected a construction of sociopolitical life that transcends the historical frailties of African continent to foresee ways of avoiding past mistakes. On this point, Wole Soyinka asserts that:

The writer is the visionary of his people, he recognizes past and present not for the purpose of enshrinement but for the logical creative impulse and statement of ideal future. He anticipates, he warns. It is not enough for the writer to be involved in the direct physical struggle of today, he often cannot help but envisage and seek to protect the future which is the declared aim of contemporary struggle.²³

This statement by Soyinka reinforces my view that naturalism goes beyond the historical description of life. It analyses the past, uses this to understand the present and anticipates the future by predicting through plausible projections things which may happen in the future.

From this perspective, I see naturalism as both descriptive and predicative in content. Naturalism is descriptive in the sense that it delineates African history and chronicles the continent's endeavor to come to terms with colonial forces. It is also prescriptive in that it seeks to project in literature the possible ways of future events reading from past experiences, and from there prescribe attitudes to adopt to avoid in the future mistakes that occurred in the past. The prescriptive aspect of naturalism is interested in showing the how postcolonial affairs should be run in order to build a meaningful future for Africa. From that perspective, it takes lessons from history to anticipate sociopolitical events by constructing fictional possible ways of that future events may occur. Naturalism as a theory seeks to locate in drama the ability of the artist's creative mind to

²³ Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988, p. 20)



anticipate with realism what may occur in the future, by constructing stories, scenes and episodes that are close to real future.

Thirdly, naturalism offers the possibility to relocate in drama aspects of the African values, objects and characters that were dislocated by the colonial discourse. The central concern of African drama as a literature of consciousness has been the strategic writing style that can change the African condition from bad to good. A naturalist approach to African theatre engages theory and criticism to reading the representation of historical tragedies in Africa from realist perspective but tries to reconstruct that part of life that was lost. That reconstruction is what I refer to as relocation of the dislocated values. Dislocation affects all those value systems that because of colonial hegemonic practices, need, in a sense, to be 'reinvented' in language, in narrative aesthetics, or myth. African drama in the main developed as a critical response to European colonialism which negatively impacted African theatrical traditions and weakened its literary documentation. In the 19th century, African identity was constructed by Eurocentric writers and was reflected in literary works as stereotypical and derogatory due to the fact that they assimilated African cultural practices with primitive, superstitious and barbaric ways. African playwrights in their theoretical approaches have attempted to redefine and recast that identity to provide an objective image of Africans.

Fourthly, naturalism helps to read trends in African drama that establish a link between social ethics and the established laws of human conduct that regulate them. Despite the naturalist tendency of critical theory, few critics advocate the reading strategy that locates the historical experience of colonialism as drama itself. Drama here is taken to mean the interplay between the social construction of life and the ironical deconstruction of its tenets by colonial agents. Naturalism as a theory looks at particular national contexts where the independence struggles that were expected to yield true socio-cultural, economic and political freedoms became shattered dreams with the disillusionment that followed these struggles. As a matter of fact, dramatists rewrite African postcolonial stories with the desired oriented ideologies that restore justice. I am going to illustrate with examples starting from reading plays to articulating their theoretical approaches.

For instance, Frank Ogodo Ogbeche in *Harvest of Corruption* and Chinyere Grace Okafor in *The New Toy Toy*, and Irene Isoken Salami-Ogunloye in *Sweet Revenge* have created situations whereby evil doers are punished by human laws and by the laws of the nature while benefactors are rewarded according to their good deeds. Naturalist approach to these plays show the relationship between ethical norms in human society and the law of nature that punishes trespassers. For instance, in *Harvest of Corruption*, Chief Aladu Ade Amanka faces trial and loses his job as a consequence of his embezzlement of public



funds and his immoral deals with Aloho who died during abortion. Naturalism verges on realism and provide ingredients for teaching morality to social actors. Since then such theory has provided staple ingredients for reforming society, it can be said that naturalism is fundamental to postcolonial theory as the main setting in these plays are the postcolonial African states and the main discourse is to deconstruct the hegemony of imperialism operated by the African rallies of the European ex-colonialists. In modern African drama, naturalism and realism are theories built on practical guidance on right action, the outlook of natural jurisprudence highly influential in ensuring a continuous focus on rationality of the postcolonial state and the constant and uniform accessibility to the human rights as a shared privilege of citizens. I suggested that naturalism as a theory of modern African drama is both descriptive and prescriptive. Another such understanding is that it is descriptive in the because it describes in plays the imaginative genius of moral interplay between social actors and the code of ethics that guides and sanctions their actions. It is also prescriptive in the sense that it shows through the inductive analysis of the stories created the moral frame that people living in society are supposed to abide by in order to live in peace and harmony. Naturalism in modern African drama arose as a response to the general malaise felt about the mismanagement of the postcolonial state by political juntas, some oligarchic corrupt leaders who side-tracked ethical norms in their ruling and broke loose with regard to political morality without yet being sanctioned by the state judicial apparatus, a mechanism they have created and are controlling. I infer that naturalism is sustained by morality plays. Behind every morality play one can find a strong naturalist ideology. This critical stand is shared by Charles Uji who asserts:

There is currently an aesthetic, philosophic tangentiality in the African literary dramatic and theatrical arts with particular emphasis on the English idiom. On the one hand there exists the drama of bourgeois, idealist aesthetics which predominates the scene, while on the other hand one notices the drama of revolutionary, Marxist poetics... It is my contention that the principal characteristics of Nigerian drama of bourgeois aesthetics include uncomfortable fact that they project a cyclical view of history and development.²⁴

The critic Uji is describing the relationship between the theatre of the oppressed and the theatre of the oppressor in the Marxist tradition without making it explicit that Marxism itself is the product of naturalism. Marxist literary approach describes in plays class struggles and ideological contestation for hegemony between the masses, or the working class and the ruling bourgeois in economic conditions of exploitation and oppression of the former by the latter. From this perspective, Marxism is predicated on naturalism or

²⁴ Charles Uji, "Sowande's Revolutionary Socio-Aesthetic Ideal" pp. 44-66 in Ola Rotimi, ed., *Issues in African Theatre* (Ibadan: HP Humanities Publishers, 2001), p. 44.



realism in that it describes real social living conditions. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *I Will Marry When I Want* responds to the Marxist and naturalist ideology in that the story brings the factory workers of the Kigunda type in contestation and class struggles with the bourgeois Kioi.

There is a close relationship between naturalism or realism, the theatre of absurd and existentialism. In other words, naturalism is also the ability to tell the truth when things go wrong. This desire to tell the truth especially when things are wrong give sometimes the playwright a pessimistic view of the society. This pessimistic view may verge on existentialism. So, a playwright with naturalist orientations may develop existentialist ideas. I will use examples to make the point clear. Naturalism took over from the theatre of the absurd campaigned for many decades by playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Athol Fugard in which good characters with strong moral intent never get their way until they die and are buried with their dream, and the society is described upside down as people are engaged in self-destructive adventure. Wole Soyinka's *The Road*, Ola Rotimi's *Holdings Talk* and Athol Fugard's *People Are Living There* narrate stories with characters in an absurdist engagement. For instance, Professor's insanity in *The Road* is coupled with the existentialist mood in which people strive to get rich only to die in road accidents, an apt metaphor to the postcolonial civil warfare that damaged many African countries including Nigeria. Athol Fugard's *People Are Living There* highlights the inhuman living conditions under the Apartheid regime where human life is trapped in the snare of ablaze violations of human rights with infernal cycles of killings, rape, arsons. Fugard's existentialist praxis comes in the form of a question as to what good end serves life in South African society if one should strive to build only to see all property including human life dwindle in a smoke of arson and police mortal brutalities? In other words, Fugard develops a naturalist ideology that practically unveils an existentialist intent to criticize South African Apartheid regime for reducing life in an infernal cycle of birth and death with no possibility for black Africans to realize their full potentials as human beings and citizens of the world. Existential philosophical outlook becomes a constituent in the African drama and theoretical formulation of such drama needs to be aware of its tenets. It is not far-fetched to say that the tragic history of African continent which was tested successively by slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism inform the existentialist vision of many playwrights. Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* and Bode Sowande's *Farewell to Babylon* and Femi Osofisan's *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* are all written with existentialist outlook. The three writers draw on Nigerian civil war to articulate the tragic self-destruction of human societies and question the meaning of life trapped in the vicious circle of birth and premature death. Soyinka in *Of Africa* states:



... the resolution of the existential dilemma... or indeed to global survival if only they were known about or permitted their proper valuation. There is also of course the aspect of negative attributes, one whose very nature constitutes a burden on others. We are speaking here of a condition where the unravelling of a part can menace the health or survival of the whole.²⁵

Soyinka in this statement brings out the fact that existentialism and naturalism correlate. Naturalism in modern African drama also reads from the perspective of realist vision of the society that orients the playwright and the ability of the critic to theorize of that vision. Drama is seen as a means by which objective reality is reflected upon. Gyorgy Lukacs observes:

If literature [drama] is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then, it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately on the surface. If a writer strives to represent reality as it truly is, i. e. if he is an authentic realist, the question of totality plays a decisive role, no matter how the writer actually conceives the problem intellectually..²⁶

This critical view means that realism and naturalism are if not two faces of the same coin, but at least. Drama as a literary genre offers a practical avenue for diagnosing and discussing society's problems, to grasp socio-political and cultural realities and fictionalize them on stage and plays. In African context, the historical factor plays a key role in understanding the birth, the rise and the theoretical frames of drama in Africa.

Michael Etherton in seeking to solve the theoretical problem of African drama did not take into account the dramatic aspect of African history, an aspect which nevertheless comes to reinforce the theoretical understanding of drama in Africa. A referential frame of theatre theory refers to the contending ideas and opinions about theatre and interpretation. Interpretation has been conceptualized to designate an objective textual analysis, critical assessment and response to colonialism and neocolonialism. African colonial past provides a frame of African theatre theory as a naturalist delineation of intellectual reaction to construct African identity, and political agendas. These conceptualizations brought in African theatre context contribute to read plays as critical responses to imperialism and neocolonialism. Taken together, theorists adhere to very different often contradictory understandings of theatre and interpretation. As a matter of fact, critics have often arrived at converging but conflicting formulations of theory regarding the development and status of African theatre. Such conflicts point to the vitality, the excitement, and the complexity of the field of theory and criticism whose expansive universe of perennial issues and problems engages ideas not only about theatre as

²⁵ Wole Soyinka, *Of Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. vii.

²⁶ Gyorgy Lukacs, "Realism in the Balance" 1033-1058 in Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 1033.



literature, its language, interpretation, genre, style, meaning, and tradition, but also about subjectivity, ethnicity, race, gender, class, culture, nationality, ideology, institutions and historical periods.

4. Conclusion

In this article, the objective was to elucidate the reasons why symbolism and naturalism emerge as the suitable critical theories that best apply to African drama. Two key ideas have emerged: African drama due to its contextualized predication on indigenous performances make an extensive use of symbols in every aspect of its performance and expression. The use of symbols and symbolic language makes it meaningful to view African drama in the light of symbolism and naturalism. Drama in Africa is symbolically oriented and naturalistically grounded. Symbolism becomes a fundamental theoretical tool suitable for interpreting the intrinsic dimensions of drama. Secondly, naturalism in the context of African drama is a literature of consciousness that developed in response to Eurocentric imperial discourse and critical lenses for assessing postcolonial politics. From this perspective, naturalism comes to reinforce symbolism as critical tools in the examination of drama.

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