



# Afrotopia and African Agency in Nigerian Drama: A Marxist Reading of Tess Onwueme's *No Vacancy*

---

GERALDO Al Kabirou

[alkabirougeraldo@gmail.com](mailto:alkabirougeraldo@gmail.com)

LARE Damlègue

[laredamlegue@gmail.com](mailto:laredamlegue@gmail.com)

Université de Lomé

**Abstract** - The main objective of this article is to show through a Marxist reading, how pejorative representations of African continent in literary texts of dramatic expression demean creative nexus and developmental agendas in fictions whereas, a constructive invention of the African agency is plausible to promote new representations and resilience, using Tess Onwueme's *No Vacancy* (2005) as an example. The specific question addressed in this study is to what extent pervasive language in socio-political rhetoric on Africa's underdevelopment contributes to create ideological ambiguities in literature while African agency is otherwise contained in a language reprogramming that resets Africa at the center. More specifically, it is an attempt to broadcast a new image of Africa through a Marxist reading of the literary text under study.

**Keywords:** Afrotopia, African agency, development, language

**Résumé** - L'objectif principal de cet article est de montrer, à travers une lecture marxiste, comment les représentations péjoratives du continent africain dans les textes littéraires d'expression dramatique dégradent les liens récréatifs et les agendas de développement dans les fictions alors qu'une invention constructive de l'agence africaine est plausible pour promouvoir de nouvelles représentations et résilience, en utilisant *No Vacancy* (2005) de Tess Onwueme comme exemple. La question spécifique abordée dans cette étude est de savoir dans quelle mesure le langage pervers dans la rhétorique sociopolitique sur le sous-développement de l'Afrique contribue à créer des ambiguïtés idéologiques dans la littérature alors que l'agence africaine est par ailleurs contenue dans une reprogrammation du langage qui remet l'Afrique au centre. De façon plus spécifique, il s'agit d'une tentative de diffuser une nouvelle image de l'Afrique par une lecture marxiste du texte sous étude.

**Mots clés :** Afrotopia, agence africaine, développement, langage.

## INTRODUCTION

Literary discourses on postcolonial drama in Africa have discussed issues related to society without paying due attention to the theme of African agency as a Marxist aesthetics from the perspective of Tess Onwueme's plays. Omafume F. Onoge asserts that African Marxist criticism has far concentrated on the ideological critic of the literature (Omafume F., Onoge, 2013: 472). The critic does not show in clear terms how Marxism reads as transformational discourse in African literature. Amilcar Cabral maintains that "Marxist study of the history of

liberation [...] struggles in literature shows that they have generally been preceded by an upsurge of cultural manifestations, which progressively harden into an attempt to assert the cultural personality of the dominated people (Cabral, 2013: 486). For Chidi Amuta, Marxist aesthetics, therefore, is ultimately an open-ended legacy, a fact which inheres in its dialectical heritage. In the African context, we can identify specific challenges which have provided the locus for the engagement of Marxism in literary creativity, theory and criticism (Amuta, 2013: 507). It is Omolola A. Ladele who seems to have looked closely at Tess Onwueme's *No Vacancy*<sup>1</sup> in terms of Marxist aesthetics by highlighting the presence of social classes in the play: "*No Vacancy* is Tess Onwueme's use of precarity as an organizing trope for galvanizing social and political actions. Precarity in this context then becomes a discursive frame for her dramaturgy" (Ladela, 2021: 32). Yet, her analysis is incomplete as it suffers from lack of pragmatism in terms of the agency ethos that defines the playwright's Marxist aesthetics and looms large in her creative vision. The critics mentioned above have neglected the aspect of Onwueme's creative vision that reads in the Marxist formulation of Afrotopia and agency as advocacies of Africa's transformational potential possible from the determination of characters to rise from the prevailing condition of precarity (unemployment and poverty) to a more acceptable condition of development if not in practical terms, at least in their mental perception. The absence of criticism from that angle invites my present study in this article. My purpose is to analyse from a Marxist critical approach Tess Onwueme's Marxist literary perception of precarity and her construction of African agency through a transformative look of society. The theoretical and methodological approaches lean on postcolonial Marxist critical theory suggested by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chidi Amuta. That theory advocates the necessity to decolonize the African mind and from the colonial inferior complex and to redefine the African character as a transformative agent able to forge new outlook and regenerate Africa in the new values of shared responsibility, humanism development. It rejects dogmatic fatality and calls for a reappraisal of the African as a responsible individual, architect of the Africa's development.

## 1. Marxist Literary Perception of Precarity

Afrotopia was coined by Senegalese Scholar Felwine Sarr in an essay of the same title *Afrotopia* (2017) to describe "African utopia" or the false perception that African scholars may have about the possible emergence of Africa as the center

---

<sup>1</sup> Tess Onwueme, *No Vacancy*. Trenton: Africa World Press. 2005. Further references to this play are from the same edition and will be referred to as NV followed by the page number.



of world development. The concept was predicated on René Dumont's *L'Afrique noire est mal partie* [*Africa is on a Bad Start*] (1962), where Dumont used a number of internal and external factors of African underdevelopment to assert that the black continent will never recover from its colonial and postcolonial cultural, economic and socio-political loss. The concept has stirred much commotion and problematized the Marxists critical view of the African continent as a dynamic dialectical entity progressively finding its way towards development and recovery. Marxist critics among who Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe have defended the idea that Africa despite its past errors and perils still has something to offer to the world and needs to relate to the other people on egalitarian footing (Achebe, 1988, Ngugi, 1993). Ngugi's philosophy of "moving the center" comes as a call to visualise Africa in a new stream light of development and centrality. Contemporary scholars of the Achebe and Ngugi school like Tess Onwuema thus reconceptualise Afrotopia to mean not the utopia of African development but the actual possibility of "seeing Africa at the top" of world affairs. I pursue this philosophy of Afrotopia (Africa at the top) in this study by reading Onwuema's *No Vacancy* as a play with Marxist discursive philosophy. The basic advocacies of Marxism as shown in Tess Onwueme's *No Vacancy* include public ownership of the means of livelihood, exchange and production of the same means by some oligarchic state representatives in the function of political leaders and rich capitalists. In Lois Tyson's terms, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education (2006: 54). Thus, economics is the *base* on which the *superstructure* of social/political/ideological realities is built. Economic power therefore always includes social and political power as well. This brings Ngugi wa Thiong'o to assert:

What we are talking about is whether or not a writer's imaginative leap to grasp reality is aimed at helping, or hindering the community's struggle for a certain quality of life free from all parasitic exploitative relations. We are talking about the relevance of literature in our daily struggle for the right and security to bread, shelter, clothes and song. The right of a people to the products of their sweat; The extent to which the writer can and will help in not only explaining the world but in changing it will depend on his appreciation of the classes and values that are struggling for a new order, a new society and a more human future... (Ngugi, 2013: 478).

Here Ngugi explains Marxist critical theory as the commitment of literary art for a constructive change in society whereby class struggles aim at humanizing life for the benefit of the underprivileged. Ideological belonging to stratified socio-economic classes of rich and poor and the characterization of their economic realities chart characters' mind and thought system. Tess Onwueme's Marxist thinking points to the present structuration of the Nigerian society as antagonistic class-based one stratified in two factions: the rich like Chairman



Freedom, Lady Affluence and Justice and the poor namely Jobseekers and Petty trader. Characters are class-conscious. Almost all characters in *No Vacancy* talk, discuss and reflect in terms of their living conditions. While the rich flaunt their wellbeing status and the wealth they amassed, the poor reason in terms of their precarious conditions and how to come to terms with it. The rich having constructed several avenues of exploitative power management not only employ the rest of the nation – the youth in the main – for meagre revenue, but have actually created uncountable numbers of unemployed degree holders who don't have means of survival. The Marxist advocacies of Onwueme points certain facts in the play.

Firstly, that the economic condition of the people determines their level of consciousness. Poverty created in the downtrodden an acute consciousness for self-liberation determining thereby the level of their awareness and their collective consciousness to fight against the unjust ruling system.

When you are robbed... Robbed of any worth, hope, faith in you? And you are treated as if you are just a mere article without value? Eh? And in your own country, too? Denied any real worth or name to myself? And no opportunity? Well, what else I am I expected to do? Stay there to ferment, freeze or fly? Just because I am jobless? (NV: 11).

Marxist aesthetics read here when the playwright brings the character to full awareness of his precarious condition. Being aware that corrupt leaders have robbed their dignity by off shooting popular concerns of job and food, Freedom now turns to revolutionary ideas whereby the masses may overthrow the oligarchic corrupt leaders to be able to carve a dignified place in terms of employment and social position. It seems after close reading that Tess Onwueme has exploited Antonio Gramsci's Marxist thinking about class system and social revolution. Gramsci believes that language has a creative force and language proceeds from an articulate thinking about social change; the day-to-day socio-economic conditions that assail human mind (Gramsci, 1921/1978: 54). So to provoke change, one needs to think positively about the possibility of that change and to actually confess through a language that appeals to reforms. That is why the reader sees characters in the utterances above utter words that describe their living conditions. Gramsci employs language to think through how human agency is related to structure. He is particularly interested into how the structures of language are used to understand that as individuals we do have creative freedom and what Peter Ives quoting Marx says, "we create our own history, but not under the conditions of our own choosing. In other words, we are not able to do this in a total vacuum or with no constraints" (Peter Ives 2004: 10). Marxist discourse in the context of this play *No Vacancy* also foregrounds anti-imperialist struggle against both European predictions of African impossible recovery and some corrupt African leaders' belief that African masses cannot emerge from



destitution to emancipated and fulfilled life. Marxist aesthetics in context further points to the capacity of the characters to use their creative mind to question aspects of their living conditions that demand individual and collective actions to change from bad to good. The freedom to express their aspiration to freedom, peace and development, by off shooting the assailing poverty through job connections or creative occupations that contribute the least to improving the society's conditions is part of the Marxist ideals defined by Tess Onwueme (NV: 64).

Agency is the capacity that one has to do things on personal and communal behalf with the aim to achieve specific results. In this study I use it to underscore the way Tess Onwueme fixes characters in *No Vacancy* by endowing them with critical thinking and capacity to do things that that translates their creative vision. As such, agency is the moving engine of creative change in post-colonial Africa. Cedric J. Robinson observes that "Just as western European middle classes were suspended in webs of state parochialisms, so too is that vast majority of Nigerian peoples: the lower orders." (2000: 21) The class that rules in *No Vacancy*, the nobility, by its orchestration of the instrumentalities of the state, imprint its character on the whole of Nigerian society. And since much of that character has to do with exploitation, oppression, and unemployment, the lower classes are woven into the tapestry of a violent social order. By the nature of social hierarchy system, the integration of the lower classes-wage laborers, peasants, students, apprentices, freelance people, and beggars-into the social, political, and economic orders of the State was on the terms of the clients of the latter. The function of the laboring classes is to provide the state and its privileged classes with the material and human resources needed for their maintenance and further accumulations of power and wealth. This is not, however, a simple question of the dominance of a ruling class over the masses.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin endorse that

Agency refers to the ability to act or perform an action. In contemporary theory, it hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2013: 9).

One important decimal in *No Vacancy* that constitutes the post-independent predicament is the precarity of life of African countries after the independence. Africa is associated with evils of bad leadership, corruption, bribery, criminality, moral indecency, violence and mediocrity. The effect of such evils on individual and the nation as a whole is the general regression of Africa at economic, social and political levels: "Two steps backward! One step forward! Three steps backwards! One step forward! Four steps backward! One step forward! ... Ten steps backward! One step forward" (NV: 85). What transpires from this is





Onwueme's way of explaining the backwardness of Africa as a result of bad management, incompetent leadership and corrupt practices. From there hiatus is created for the reader to see the interconnection between corruption and underdevelopment on the one hand and the underdevelopment condition of Africa and the necessity of change. It follows that change is not an option but a double necessity for the individual and the nation first in character and secondly in creative ambition. The change in character points to the revisitation of individuals in their thinking system. The change in creative ambition addresses the visionary ability of the African to define, carve out and hold on and pursue development projects that sustain resilience at short medium and long terms. There should be a movement: from inability to ability and from stagnation to reforms.

Tess Onwueme's *No Vacancy* has been subject of much critical explanation without yet being perceived as a critical turning point in the development of Afrotopia idea about African agency, that is, the possibility of envisioning the African postcolonial subject as an active agent and transformational tool exploring new possibilities of Africans creative potential to trigger social development.

Ngugi's marxist theory in *Decolonizing the Mind* points to what he calls resistance to imperialist tradition:

[...] African realities as they are affected by the great struggle between the two mutually opposed forces in Africa today: an imperialist tradition on one hand, and a resistance tradition on the other. The imperialist tradition in Africa is today maintained by the international bourgeoisie using the multinational and of course the flag-waving native ruling classes (Ngugi, 1981: 2).

He further maintains that the economic and political dependence of this African neo-colonial bourgeoisie is reflected in its culture of apemanship and parrotry enforced on a restive population through police boots; barbed wire, a gowned clergy and judiciary; their ideas are spread by a corpus of state intellectuals, the academic and journalistic laureates of the neo-colonial establishment (Ibidem). Ngugi articulates African realities as struggle of the rich and the poor, the rich embodied by an imperialist tradition, a continuation of European exploitative colonial legacy and African and the poor by the working people, the jobless intellectuals and the underpaid labourers.

The resistance tradition is being carried out by the working people (the peasantry and the proletariat) aided by patriotic students, intellectuals (academic and non-academic), soldiers and other progressive elements of the petty middle class. This resistance is reflected in their patriotic defence of the peasant/worker roots of national cultures, their defence of the democratic struggle in all the nationalities inhabiting the same territory. Any blow against imperialism, no matter the ethnic and regional origins of the blow, is a victory, for all anti-imperialistic elements in all



the nationalities. The sum total of all these blows no matter what their weight, size, scale, location in time and space makes the national heritage (Ngugi 1981: 2).

The evils of corruption and incompetent leadership call for a transformative change that needs to be done at the levels of citizens' mentality and style of live. Change of mentality starts from what Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls "decolonizing the mind" (1981) which points to the individuals' rejecting victimization and asserting their creative potentials in the society's transformational ethos. To decolonize one's mind is to go beyond the perception of self as colonial or social victim and believing in his/her capacity as African citizen to carve new vision, undertake actions that definitely bring constructive change in Africa: "An intelligent visionary dynamic.... with human direction" (NV: 67). At personal level the individual should believe in his/her capacity to do things by him/herself which should redefine Africa and Africans position in world history. To make agency operational the African character should reset priorities, redefine goals and fix direction in which to go to achieve that objective. Markers of identity should African These various images constructed fixes Africa as the perpetual victim of neo-colonial stigmata couched in the political manoeuvring of bad leadership. One such manifestation is unemployment that ranks top among the youth. Unemployment itself finds its remote causes in the unwillingness of leaders to create job opportunities. Coupled with the lack of will, the State authorities of the play secure positions for themselves and their offspring making it difficult for the poor to accede to decent jobs. Tess Onwueme describes Nigeria as "A country where only one job exists... Created by the one and only Presido and for a handful of his bloated friends and allies. Can't you see that since he came into power even the pre-existing jobs have disappeared?" (NV: 19). Nigeria as the epitome of Africa is depicted with the highest unemployment rate with low living standards. Such a perception although it is true nevertheless confines the country in the pigeon hole of mediocrity. To talk of unemployment is to show indirectly what the absence of job does in the life of a person. Civil servants and other salary workers owe their living to the salary they earn. In addition, material acquisition and social achievements like renting or building a house, buying a car, travelling, having holidays, paying one's children's education, supplying the family needs are possible thanks to the money earned through job. Consequently, the absence of job renders the foregoing achievements difficult, even impossible. Liberty explains: "when you are robbed... Robbed of any worth, hope, faith in you? And you are treated as if you're just a mere article without value? Eh? And in your own country, too?" (NV: 11). A jobless person is an impotent person in terms of social achievements and mobility. People with jobs who have under their charge jobless people in families consider them as dependents for they cannot survive alone, but with the financial assistance of the employed. Destitution in the play is a marker of

precarity: Justice proclaims: "can't even pay my bills. Can't go far. Nowhere. Nothing." (NV: 27). This statement alludes to people's precarious conditions. In addition, Director states: "There are lots of able-bodied unemployed here, including all these graduates, begging, begging with their 'Hard Earned Degrees'. So be careful." (NV: 17). At the state level, unemployed constitute potential dangers for the leaders in that through revolts, they may cause social uprising and political instability. The play also reads that when unemployment rate is high the country's productivity is low. This is so because manpower constitutes the moving engine of development. Other unemployment-related issues raised in the play are illegal immigration and brain drain. The fact that the unemployed youth seek by hook and by crook to migrate in western countries and America in search of job opportunities oftentimes in perilous conditions endangers their lives and causes brain drain for the home country. Illegal immigration is a vex problem in the play. Since the immigration is illegal, it is practiced in insecure conditions, for instance, crossing the sea and being left to survive without food under poor sanitation conditions. Young immigrants at times pay with their lives as death occurs under unbearable health degradation. Here, Onwueme makes the point that if young people should venture into migration and perish on remote seashores, it would have been better to create job and educational conditions at home to maintain them in Africa. It is a remark that the young people who leave Africa for job opportunities are the very ones who work in secondary and tertiary industrial sectors in western countries for the development of these very countries. Even some great skills performances in engineering, medicine, military, law in European and American countries are achieved by Africans. In other words, if these Africans remained on the continent and given their rightful place, they could have worked hard to develop the continent. Brain drain constitutes a roadblock for Africa's development. The refusal to find job opportunities - even temporal jobs - brings the youth to accepting volunteering jobs while waiting for paid jobs. Volunteering jobs help them acquire more experience.

Another way in which Tess Onwueme calls for change of mentality is to invite people to read differently the world and fix new realities. It is a fact that developed nations like America and China combine two important elements in their struggle for development: scientific innovations, creativity, economic activities and patriotism. Africans seem not to have understood that patriotism and interpersonal love should go hand in hand with various efforts of development. and Readers should know the past (history), use it to understand the present and plan the future. Africa is engaged in a historical struggle for development and past mistakes should serve to correct present ones. Past mistakes include for instance African betraying fellow African to the colonizer,





African ethnic groups waging war against one another. If one admits that the struggle for development is common in Africa, one should also admit that the African underdevelopment predicament is common to the different countries of the continent who should therefore define strategies to struggle in synergetic actions: "And who should know that better than us in this struggle? Your history should tell, now. Show us how we must procure...secure life; healthcare. Education. Jobs. Food!" (NV: 75)

## 2. Constructing African Agency through Transformative Look of Society

Afrotopia refers to the belief in the possibility of Africa to rise and rebuild itself after the years of colonial and neo-colonial devastations by Euro-American imperialists. The widespread images of Africa as a poverty-ridden continent have fuelled the content of most creative works. The first generation of African writings like *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963) by Wole Soyinka, *The Black Hermit* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o have portrayed European colonial incursion in Africa and the socio-political and cultural disorganization caused by such incursion. The spectre of material and cultural devastation continued to be depicted in the second generation plays like Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* and Frank Ogodo Ogbecbe's *Harvest Of Corruption*. Corruption, civil conflicts, military coups, prostitution, criminality, insecurity, child trafficking and religious violence and similar evils are the apt metaphor of Africa's backwardness. Such narrative accounts have given the impression to readers outside Africa that Africa will never rise from its colonial past and the neo-colonial predicament. If art is the creation of the mind, it is equally true that the artist can use his/her intellectual genius to portray images of an Africa which he/she wishes for the continent incorporating therein the necessary reforms to be done to reconstruct the continent. Advocates of Afrotopia as the adherents of Africa's resilience and reconstruction view the past and present underdevelopment conditions of African continent as a challenge to take by social actors sharing African territory to call for African renaissance. It follows that Afrotopic literature charts African agency as the hallmark of that intellectual and physical empowerment to offshoot the impotence of negativism and reassert the capacity of African narratives to recreate the continent with images that call for hope, invite progress and share the promise of future development. Tess Onwueme in *No Vacancy* (2005) uses unemployment on the one hand and job seeking strategies on the other to critically assess the possibility for African youth to create their own jobs and become financially autonomous. The playwright builds her authorial ideologies around three axes: creativity, determination and national service.



## 2.1. Creativity and Social Vision

Tess Onwueme adopts the philosophy of Afrotopia which means in the play's context, the emergence of Africa at the top of development, not the utopia of African development. She makes the point that creativity is the main vector of opportunity which is itself the engine of financial self-liberation. She also believes that change to be implemented should start in the mind and thinking system of individuals, Africans in context. Human beings are active agents of their own development of they decide to work toward that end. To forge ahead, one needs first to create the idea in the mind and decide to work towards that end objective. To be specific, a creative mind sees opportunity where a non-visionary mind sees stagnation and despair. Liberty a young jobless character asserts: "If the government can't create or make jobs, I can. Yes, this body can! For you see, life experience, they say's the best teacher" (NV: 11). This statement is the determination he arrives at after exploring ideas of possible remedy to joblessness that prevails in his living condition. The very statement "I can" translate the level of determination to initiate survival activities, no matter how small they are. He further states: "to see living as acting. [We] were trained to combat the problems of life" (NV: 67). Education as perceived in *No Vacancy* not as a guarantee for employment, but as a tool of empowerment which should contribute to open the mind and intellectual perception of the educated to create his/her own job. In the play emphasis is laid on small beginnings and volunteering that should lead to bigger achievements. Examples include community service in school education, public service in health care and sanitation, supporting environmental and ecologic maintenance against pollution. Dreaming big should lead one to start small. The refusal to start from scratch to grow progressively leads some young people in illusionary expectations of great achievements which never materialise. The case in point is the character called Freedom: a degree holder, Freedom marks the difference from the rest of his generation by creating his own job, cleaning the environment and initiating community services. Although creativity is the mind exercise, it comes in different shapes and materializations in the play. There are social, occupational, political, cultural and educational creativities. Social creativity concerns the creation of utilitarian social services like garbage collection, water supply, and assistance to the sick. The main objective of such creativity is community service. Although social creativity does not aim at making money straightforward, the playwright makes it evident that in the long run such community service may become lucrative and turn into an employment. Occupational creativity is the creation of activities that can procure petty revenues. Income generating activities are also the solicitation of a creative mind. Tess Onwueme has it that a job seeker can initiate petty income generating



activities while waiting for employment by government agencies or international corporations. In *No Vacancy* she charts the idea that a self-employed person can become an employer if his business grows. Private business creation reverses the idea that degree holders have to be necessarily employed by their government agencies. While Onwueme acknowledges the fact that getting government employment is a right for every citizen, she does not exclude the possibility that starting private enterprise is an option when the government tarries to recruit: “education – employment – peace” logic do not always work (NV: 67). It follows that inaction among the youth breeds resentment and revolts often leading to violent repression by armed forces and possibly resulting in loss of lives. Political creativity refers to the fact of creating environment that are conducive to political activities enhancing peace and development. Political creativity enables the youth to actively take part in the political life of the country. Both loyalists and dissidents can be creative politically. When the former will create activities to support the leaders, the latter can create parties to compete for power in the spirit of nationalist interest. Tess Onwueme places national interest beyond personal and selfish ones. For instance, if two political rivals are competing for power, their end objective should be to serve the interests of the nation not to use public office terms to serve personal ambitions. She also counters the view that leaders and their personalities are irreplaceable. A leader is useful as long as he/she serves the nation by promoting excellence in his leadership for the population’s profit. Creativity of the leaders should enable them to see possibilities to solve job and health related problems, and remedy to food and peace security needs. It follows that in the play’s logic, to govern is to foresee and anticipate situations beforehand. To anticipate on events and facts, one needs to be visionary. Creative vision should aim at programming and planning long-term, middle-term and short-term developmental goals to achieve. “We fight to make up! Fight make-up! Until we find our voice together” (NV: 21). Allusions are made to the various crises namely electoral and terrorist. For the playwright leadership creativity should plan and anticipate situations so as to work out solutions in advance. If leaders are willing to remedy terrorist problems in Nigeria for instance, long-term security measures should be taken for that purpose. Most difficulties in African leadership stem from the inability to be visionary so as to create preventive measures. Onwueme also makes the point that it is cheaper and more efficient to prevent a crisis than to solve it when it occurs.

Creativity at cultural level points at creating values that sustain life and promote development in society. Here, Onwueme develops a pragmatism that dovetails the very idea of excellence, competence and performance as culture. Excellence refers to the fact of ranking top in one’s endeavour or achievement. Competence is close to excellence and refers to the quality of upward mobility in a particular



field of productivity. Performance points to the quality of increasing productivity aiming at the best of the score. The culture of excellence in education, employment, politics, economy, art, and other social achievement is encouraged to reach the top potentials of African youth. It is a fact that in Africa many people do not have the culture of judicious time management and the culture of economy. When people spend time in criticism, internal conflicts and unnecessary haggling, they will not have enough time for work. Work demands concentration and devotion. As such, it also needs organisation. Time is a parameter that contributes to do work. Good performances take time sometimes. Also, being late at work and using office hours for personal business contribute to poor performance and results. Indirectly, the playwright encourages citizens to have a sense of professionalism and develop patriotic values that sustain hard work. That logic further admits that the best development everywhere and every time has been the achievement of citizens who love their countries to work hard to promote development. Onwueme finds that one should not ask what his/her country can do for them, but rather what one can do for his/her country.

Ask not what your country  
Can do for you  
But what you can  
Do for your country! (NV: 70)

To be able to ask not what one's country has done for him/her but what one has done for his/her country one needs to reach a certain degree of maturity. At this stage, self-criticism is determinant to be able to readjust personal values to redefine larger patriotic intents. Onwueme engages the characters and challenges the readers to reconsider African problem especially by overcoming the accusatory mentality of colonialism demarking thereby themselves from the unfruitful debates on colonial past, to believe in and proclaim the capacity of Africa to develop and set standards for the world to follow. African therefore should be seen as the main agents of change. The social vision that perceives African renaissance as a necessity struggles to make constructive change become true. Buying and consuming local food and items is part of the creative vision aiming at transforming Africa: "Grown in Africa... All you need. Best designer fashion here. Buy your own. Today. The global market in my pocket" (NV: 35). By recommending Africans to love and buy home-made products, Tess Onwueme points to the national development policy that prioritizes home articles over foreign ones. In line with the Marxist philosophy, the purchase and consuming of local materials and products will enhance national development and dismantle and break down the chains of profit made by Euro-American corporations from what African citizens actually do not benefit from. Tess Onwueme establishes that one way to achieve development is to encourage local



and national productivity which is the centre of African economy. She combats the idea that African keep enriching foreign corporations like European and neglecting African's on which they nevertheless depend for subsistence. In other words, African marketing policy should aim at developing home products and downgrading foreign ones especially when the latter are not irreplaceable. The colonial mentality according to which "everything from Europe is good and everything from Africa is bad" is exposed and condemned by Tess Onwueme in *No Vacancy*. The playwright presents these sets of ideas as a discovery through the character Freedom:

"Eureka! I have found it" (NV: 28).

"Eureka", let's remember was the word uttered by the Greek scientist Archimedes when he discovered the laws governing Archimedes thrust and which revolutionized the world of physics at that time. By letting Freedom shout that word, the playwright underscores an important aspect of her creative social vision concerning Africa's problems: on the one hand, the necessity to continue researching solutions and on the other, the urge to innovate, invent and create things susceptible to generate jobs and find solution for scientific and technological needs of Africans. "Eureka" is the symbol of effort in research, innovation and discoveries. It epitomizes the unrelenting search for solution for daily problems. Symbolism plays a key role here in that it unveils important aspects of the dramatist's philosophical outlook. Africa with her manpower potentials, intellectual genius, and resources can emerge as a developed continent on nearly equal footing as America or China if aspects of creativity were given due attention. Many domains need innovation and creativity: education, economy, politics, technology, culture and science. In education for instance, Tess Onwueme believes in the reformulations of curricula giving priorities to disciplines that will help the degree holder to be useful in professional world. It is a fact that in most African universities and training centres, the trainings people receive are not in consonance with the professional needs of their societies. As such, the degree holders find it difficult to be professionally inserted. Those schools who still teach colonial disciplines should be encouraged to update the curricula to offer professionally needed courses. In the economic field, there is a necessity to reinforce productivity, giving priority to agriculture and primary industry. Also the debate of African currency proper to the continent looms in the play. If African countries could unite to adopt their own currency, it would help solve some economic problems. Politically, the Africans need to define their model of democracy which is not forcibly the European or American model. Democracy that brings stability, peace and development in Africa is encouraged in the play. Although a model of democracy is not proposed by the playwright, she nevertheless lets the reader to guess that Africans should define their own democracy, which is not forcibly the western





model. Also leaders are urged to consider the nations' interests above their own. It is often selfish ambitions that lead leaders to plunder in corruption and embezzlement. Democracy entails many values among which constructive criticism through freedom of speech. When Freedom complains that in "this country we have only one employment and one employed" he means the president of Republic, and indirectly, he points to the accumulation of functions and salaries by the representative of the state. Constructive criticism brings to rectitude aspects of the deviational practices that prevent development. The best development ever achieved by a people has always been the one initiated by nationalists and from within (the interior of the country). Put otherwise, it is utopic in the playwright's ideology to expect foreigners to come and develop Africa for Africans. As such, creative thinking and positive ideas should flow from African intellectuals' mind to produce genuine strategic ideas for development.

Another aspect of political morality necessary for Africa's development is the necessity to reduce expenditures related to armament. Tess Onwueme believes African leaders spend too much money on arms and leave aside development issues: "under decree 911 Patriots Act 2000- and... Chargeable WMD... Weapons of mass destruction!" (NV: 31) It is a fact that in *No Vacancy*, state expenditures are exaggeratingly enormous on unnecessary issues. Development programmes are neglected for the benefit of personal up kips. Armament meant for state security and the preservation of national integrity is good. But armaments that are used to kill fellow Africans do not promote national development. African agency should enable people to see the enemy outside, not from among fellow Africans. It is believed according to the play's philosophy that by stopping the killing of African brains and by reducing state expenditures on armaments that most definitely serve to kill Africans, African should be able to reach a satisfactory stage of development in the future. So Afrotopia in context is not the utopia of African development by an afrocentric vision of Africa as the top leader of world development.

Development is possible in an environment of security. In the context of the play security is the result of numerous parameters taking into account social and economic well-being of the community. The playwright has it that joblessness can be the root causes of social uprising, criminality and civil strife. Justice observes: "Another terrorist got killed by our most able vigilant troops!" (NV: 24) The mention of terrorists beckons to the presence of criminality and insecurity.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to analyse the literary articulations of afrotopia and agency Marxist strategies for socio-economic and cultural development in



Tess Onwueme's *No Vacancy* and explain how African masses explore avenues of their joblessness and precarity to envision transformational possibilities based on volunteering work and creativity. Two key ideas emerge from this study. Firstly, Tess Onwueme by questioning the Marxist ideology of the African Leaders nevertheless suggest alternative remedial solution for precarity and unemployment. Secondly, Transformative potential in Africa may be triggered of by creativity that hinges on the exploration of overcoming the negative colonial past and encouraging volunteering innovations in education, environment care taking and entrepreneurship.

### Bibliography

- ACHEBE, Chinua (1988), *Hopes and Impediments Selected Essays*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- AMUTA, Chidi (2013), "Marxist Aesthetics: An Open-Ended Legacy" in Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, eds., *African Literature: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Blackwell Publishing. 504-510.
- CABRAL, Amilcar (2013), "National Liberation of Culture" in in Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, eds., *African Literature: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Blackwell Publishing. 485-491.
- DUMONT, René (1962), *L'Afrique est mal parti*. Paris: Seuil.
- GRAMSCI, Antonio (1978), *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*. Translated and edited by Quintin Hoare. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- IVES, Peter (2004), *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*. London: Pluto Press.
- NGUGI, wa Thiong'o. (1981), *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- (1993), *Moving the Center: Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey.
- (2013), "Writers in Politics: The Power of Words and the Words of Power" in in Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, eds., *African Literature: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Blackwell Publishing. 2013. 476-483.
- ONOGÉ, Omafume F. (2013), "Towards a Marxist Sociology of African Literature" in Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, eds., *African Literature: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Blackwell Publishing. 463-483.
- ONWUEME, Tess. (2005), *No Vacancy*. Trenton: Africa World Press.



ROBINSON, Cederic J. (2000), *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. North Carolina: North Carolina University Press.

SARR, F. (2017), *Afrotopia*. Paris: Philippe Rey.

TYSON, Lois. (2006), *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. London and New York: Routledge.