

THE NIGERIAN PLAYWRIGHT AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF CHOICE: TWO VIEWS

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ABSTRACT

A dramatic text can possess characteristics that can distil or explicate certain significance. A deconstruction of a writer's philosophical approach to characterization reveals it as either discursive or psychoanalytical. This research analyzes selected Nigerian plays by Ahmed Yerima and Esiaba Irobi which have widespread popularity with youths and examines them with reference to the current socio-political turmoil in Nigeria. The aim is to unravel the psychoanalytical basis of audience identification with the psychological characters in the literary works. The work reveals that the approach adopted by a writer can be predicated on psychological introspection or moral grandstanding. While a choice can be made between alternative attributes, often a selection is made between real options and followed by the corresponding action. Since violence has become a major staple shaping contemporary social attitude, audience sensibility and interpretation the improper heroes depicted in Esiaba Irobi and Ahmed Yerima's works can be said to possess certain values which are commonly accepted by the Nigerian populace. Irobi and Yerima's plays will be used to buttress the argument that the playwright's interpretation of reality and transaction of this perception is predicated on a hermeneutic temperament and a deliberate philosophy of choice. The ethical perplexity of showing the vulgar reality of contemporary Nigeria while maintaining a decorous artistic level becomes a veritable Catch-22 scenario for the interpretive playwright.

INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics implies a scientific interpretation which encompasses not only the issues involved in the text or performance but everything involved in the interpretive process. It is a defined discipline of interpretation theory including the entire framework of making meaning. The hermeneutics of choice implies that the playwright's choice of subject and dramatic elements should be subjective in its style and premise. There is need for proper education in art appreciation not only on the part of the audience but theatre critics who generally quickly rush to make condemnatory statements about dramatic works without taking proper cognizance of the efforts and literary nuances fused into the works. In a post modern world such as ours, the writer's choice of creative art must be not only encouraged but enforced.

In art's bid to mirror reality while performing a dynamic function of transposing fiction to real life, Nigerian playwrights have sometimes employed what the famous American critic, Roger Ebert refers to as 'substituting depression for personality'. Choice refers to the intellectual analysis of the merits of multiple alternatives in order to pick one. A consequent action is the immediate aftermath of such a decision to engage. As a science of interpretation, hermeneutics avoids a singular critical angle toward understanding meaning. It views dramatic characters, their behaviours, and meanings as actions perceivable in multiple ways. What should be prominent to the interpreter in understanding the rationale for an act must necessarily include the internal perceptions and beliefs of the dramatic character that performed it.

As Martin Esslin says,

To writers like Beckett, Ionesco, or Pinter, the fact that boy gets girl in the last act, or that the desirability of racial tolerance is convincingly demonstrated, is irrelevant. The boy and the girl still face an absurd universe; no social reform will alter its mysteriousness. By tackling a small, and to these writers, irrelevant, segment of the reality of the human situation, the conventional theatre presents a distorted and unreal picture. If a play attempts to deal with the new content in the conventional form of logical construction, consistent characterization, and coherent language, the implied assumptions behind its form will belie its apparent content (7).

The facts which a playwright documents in the fictional text is most times creatively manipulated and in this way reshaped. This interpretive approach can dualistically aim at the restoration of a meaning addressed to the interpreter in a thematic form which requires the reader/audience's disposition to listen and absorb the understood cultural mechanism as a tool of disclosure or by contrast deconstruct meaning presented to the interpreter in the form of a disguise. The second style requires a rejection of the message as reality and skepticism toward the intended meaning.

Walter Lippman touts the assertion that writers should exploit their poetic freedom thus, "the theory of the artist as prophet has this serious defect: there is practically no evidence to support it. Why should there be? What connection is there between the capacity to make beautiful objects and the capacity to discover truth?" (95)

Sigmund Freud examines the transformation of the dream to the text as a process art. This is Esiaba Irobi's disposition in his play, *The Other Side of the Mask*. In the play, Jamike, a disgruntled sculptor who has failed to win any sculptural award after entering for so many art competitions, becomes a recluse and social outcast pining away in his house. Jamike's obvious mental imbalance degenerates to the level that his panjandrum hallucination sentences him to making distorted horrific works best described as internal scream. His futile state is worsened by his shock discovery of his mentor's dismissive comments about his work when unbeknownst to him Jamike is eavesdropping. Jamike takes out his frustration on the world and murders his neighbor before eventually taking his life just as he is announced as winner for the long awaited award. Irobi's *The Other Side of the Mask* reads very much like Esiaba Irobi's undisguised desire to win literary laurels and his eventual posthumous winning of the coveted NLNG Prize for Literature. This fact not only presupposes that a text has an unconscious life i.e. the writer's personal life on which he can work, but that the process of translating this into literature or performance is as accessible to the psychoanalytic critics as dreams are to the medical analyst. According to Paul Ricoeur, "Symbols both disguise and reveal. While they conceal the aims of our instincts, they disclose the process of self-consciousness... they express the two sides of a single symbolic function" (497).

Most Nigerian playwrights are practitioners of one of the above mentioned hermeneutic attitudes. Esiaba Irobi reveals practical ways of solving problems using the imagination to express self. Irobi perceives artistic vision from the African lens of its practical relevance to the hero's

struggle for a place in a humanist society. Irobi had strong views about the political health of Nigeria and this was influenced by his personal frustration and ideological belief that the Nigerian state was a ship on the brink of wrecking but just listing before the eventual calamity. In Ahmed Yerima's NLNG winning drama, *Hard Ground*, Nimi, the protagonist of the piece is a militant youngster engaged in guerrilla warfare against the establishment. Nimi faces serious consequences for his past nefarious actions. Yerima captures the youth restiveness in the Niger Delta area through the actions of the juvenile, Nimi, and his family. Nimi and the faceless youths in the play serve as representatives for numerous Nigerian youths who have abandoned school and are perishing in the prospect of an uneducated future.

Yerima's *Hard Ground* is an intense chronicle of the corruption, waste, pollution, militancy and political subterfuge unraveling in the Niger Delta creeks and which have gained international notoriety. It is a true to life presentation through the perspective of a fugitive protagonist hounded by betrayal within his ranks and prime suspect of sabotage awaiting judgment at the hands of the jungle supremo, the Don. The playwright in examining the problems of youth militancy, god-fatherism, and criminal activities of oil bunkering, hostage taking, blackmail and the attendant violence, manipulates a dramatic plot tethering on the lines of Marxism, realism and idealist realism. His ideology of combative social vigilantism draws a boundary between withdrawn acceptance of fate and subservient conformity with social persecutors. He highlights this slur through an evocative diction, heightened imagery and environmental composite verging on the morbid.

The play closes with Nimi's assassination of the Don whose supposed visit to Papa's household to exonerate Nimi, turns into his demise. Nimi's co-conspirator in the murderous act is his mother, Mama and both characters discover to their eternal mortification that the Don is in actuality the father of the household, Papa, the erstwhile perceived yellow belly. Irobi's hero is very decisive about his future and philosophical bearing while Yerima's hero is marked by a certain indecision, doubt and permissiveness.

MAMA: What about the future...your future?

NIMI: I don't know...we never really think about it. All we know is our future is what we want. But...our lives...That is in their hands of our God and he directs us on what to do.(Yerima 12)

On the contrary, Irobi's hero, Jamike, is psychologically articulated about his choice of action:

NJIMANZE: Jamike, control yourself...

JAMIKE: Prof., I am just a young man trying to chisel my way out of the enfolding gloom. I am just a tortured soul trying to make meaning out of a meaningless life. I am a life force (82).

Yerima's adoption of the archetypal names of Mama and Papa is deliberate and operates as a representation of the typical Niger Delta lazy alcohol guzzling father and persevering emotional mother. Yerima seems to be making a cogent case for upholding of the family fabric while appearing to be concerned generally with militancy and betrayal of trust. What Yerima is saying about unity appears segmented in approach and reductionist as against the real life unworkable federated conundrum of the apparition called Nigeria. His decision to portray the Don as Nimi's messiah is enlightening albeit his projections of this political and criminal class as prime exploiters of youths like Nimi and his dead colleagues.

These writers dual approach in analyzing a character's history requires firstly, assessment of behavior and character development from the angle of the narrative and discursive modes of construction. The second method adopts the psychoanalytical model. The moment an action on stage confirms its claim by referring to reality in the outside world, theatre loses its illusion temporality and is reclaimed by life. This misnomer is reflective of the contemporary disillusionment with certain avant-garde drama forms which have caused practitioners to provide credentials authenticating their art. This journalistic and legal angle of proof by evidence and definition of identity is the major problem facing the postmodern theatre. It is the purview of a journalist to show documentary facts for his reportage and a lawyer's requirement to show the onus of proof, introduce witnesses and argue his case etc., but theatre needs not resort to such evidencing or strict restriction. Life becomes a mirror which is held up to art as characters show the audience their own lives. Yerima, in his Author's Notes in *Hard Ground*, remarks that:

...to glorify man's animalistic tendencies, man himself has created various ways of expressing his emotions. In this entirely fictitious play, the only thing that is real is the human mind. Its complexities and man's ability to remain supremely wicked or good are the centre of my rearranged reality.(6)

HERMENEUTICS OF CHOICE

The drama of living through an aesthetic peephole is dependent on the writer's opinions, world view, imagery, and ideological posturing. According to Terry Eagleton:

if moralism holds that there is an autonomous 'moral level', at which the object is to be judged, aestheticism holds that there is an autonomous 'aesthetic level' for examining artifacts. The aesthetics is that which speaks of its historical conditions by remaining silent-inheres in them by distance and denial. The work 'shows' rather than 'state' those conditions in the nature of the productive relations it sets up to the ideological significations which found it (176-177).

The hermeneutics of choice appraises the creative interpretive style of narrative research. The comprehension of meaning involves understanding the writer's peculiar position and the problem of explanation within his base materials, the dramatic text and beyond. As Walter Lippman says, "above all, the reputation of the artist as one who must have wisdom is sustained by rather genial fallacy: he finds expression for the feelings of the spectator, and the spectator rather quickly assumes that the artist has found an explanation for the world (8). The ability of theatre to shape a people's consciousness recommends it as a necessary component in the struggle to achieve social ideals. Theatre should not rely on external restrictive moral yardsticks to prevent it from being at the forefront of opinion making and attitude shaping. Theatre makes life and theatre critics and society in general should realize this reality and adopt a more empathic tone in their moderation of the influence and components of theatre and literary creativity specifically.

The conception of the playwright as a prophet stems from the human tendency to recall guesses made by committed playwrights when they come to pass. The writer's wisdom and intellect are enhanced as the society finds through expressions about his character an explanation about the character's future and the world he lives in. If playwrights write what they are passionate about, then a biographical investigation of the writer's background might turn up parallels in the play's content with the author's own life. As much as playwrights look for new techniques to express their opinion about society, they are influenced by the peculiar material of their society.

The writer's hermeneutics of choice denotes the selective interpretive contemplation of the merits of a syllogistic approach to characterization and subject treatment in the dramatization process. Under this referral perspective, the writers under review i.e. Irobi and Yerima adopt a somewhat cognitive therapy approach in periscoping their dramatic characters, their moral burdens and their hostile societal space. These playwrights' choice options in creating plausible dramatic characters are strained as they hover between imagined multiple options before settling for the preference that best conforms to their new humanist temperaments. This concern for the character considers the internal dynamics of the central character, for example, Nimi, the protagonist in Yerima's *Hard Ground*,

NIMI: (looks at the content of the tray) mama, I cannot eat. The dream numbs my taste buds, and my mind is all confused.(26)

This ascribed option is buttressed by the subsequent violent actions of their protagonists who try to shock their society into recognition of the society's decadent humanity. Irobi's hero puts it thus:

JAMIKE: How on earth can we affirm life without death? What would life be without death? We wear on our living faces, our death masks! (94)

The chosen routes of these two playwrights are complex and involve unabashed emotionality and lamentation of the loss of man's basic essence.

A restricted choice of expression is the hallmark of a tyrannical regime. This type of regressive establishment is not really physical but psychological. It appears in the form of expectations of social commitment, obeisance to moral codes; convenient poetic justice and round character prescriptions (as if the world we live in is rounded in development). This sort of delegated decision scioned by a corrupt society is what the two writers under review try to avoid with the conscious knowledge that we live in an imperfect world and therefore the right expectation is that imperfect characters should become progenies of this imperfect society. Though the violent characters produced by the creative pens of these two writers sometimes appear too aggressive and disquiet to the audience's sense of comfort and ethical code, they perform necessary functions in awakening the primordial consciousness of the audience.

Faced with an uncertain future and unsettled present, the writers under review have decided to glance into the rear view mirror for answers. Social deductions can be contentious when the logical premises are bogus whereas the inductive arguments of these two writers about the rightful position of the youth in the society can be enlightening if the restrictive moral bars of the adult society are adjusted in the spirit of democracy. The writers to this end dish out a conjectural type of plot which mixes actual events with fictionalized idylls modeled on these writers' Marxist ideologies. This abductive rationalizing while not presupposing a certain outcome suggests a paradox conjoined with a revolutionary epilogue realizable through a collapse of existing social norms.

By discovering direction in a chaotic status quo, Yerima and Irobi seem to be making a case for a reinforcement of the society's rational armory as it appears the Nigerian polity is tottering on the brink of mental denial. The populace, from leadership to the lowest rung, only concerns itself with matters of material enrichment in a hopeless society where the acquisition of wealth can not determine the enjoyment of the same possession. People do not spend time contemplating the decadent state of the nation, its death dance to damnation, nor question the leadership on the collapsed economy of the motherland; neither do they rise up in arms and occupy Aso Rock. The narrative psychology, which reflects this logic strives to reveal human experience as a form of text construction which states that humans create their lives through an autobiographical process. Interpretation of the intended meanings of a text is a reductionist process which demands the desire to understand and the inclination to react.

Mikhail Bakhtin reformulates the notion of artistic representation to avoid a naive faith in "truth" and "reality." Human consciousness and artistic practice, Bakhtin argues, do not come into contact with the "real" directly but rather through the medium of the surrounding ideological world. As Shohat Elbe says:

Reality" is not self-evidently given and "truth" is not immediately "sizeable" by the camera. We must distinguish, furthermore, between realism as a goal - Brecht's "laying bare the causal network" - and realism as a style or constellation of strategies aimed at producing an illusionistic "reality effect." Realism as a goal is quite compatible with a style which is reflexive and deconstructive (180).

Amechi Akwanya in his article, 'The Criticism of African Literature' analyzes writers' interpretive approaches in relation to the ongoing colonization of the African mind and observes that "the

question of approaches had indeed been posed long before, but it was often mixed up in the debate whether African writing was literature or only an aspect of the politics of decolonization”(56).

Julie Agbasiere remarks that:

Literature was conceived to be functional and writers have ever since then strived to make their works useful to society... Social commitment means that writers get involved in the efforts to make society a better place to live in. It demands that writers should contribute to the realisation of the society's aspirations and to the solution of societal problems. Social commitment is an issue which continues to generate interest among writers and critics... This perception has affected their writing (71).

She makes a call for the autonomy of art and an examination of the relationship between commitment and artistic application postulating that a writer's work has value once it is functional. She poses the question whether art should be sacrificed to the writer's ideals and social preoccupations.

BayoOgunjimi in describing the essential nature of a conscientious writer opines that the socially responsible writer “depicts the uneven and lopsided structures of international and national economic race and class dichotomies, the ideological upsurge and upheavals in the continent, the incessant polarized religious ethnic and tribal disorders and the cataclysm engendered by the fallacies of the so-called new democracies” (75). He cites Mongo Beti’s definition of the great writer as a person that can question and identify the chains that really bind him, and by what means. The writer’s choice of inventive and style of implication should be representational, imagery filled and echo as a delegated voice of the silent majority as opposed to the raucous misguided minority who misleadingly look as if they are in the majority.

Shohat Elbe notes that “the narrative and mimetic arts, to the extent that they represent ethos (character) and ethnos (peoples) are considered representative not only of the human figure but also of anthropomorphic vision. On another level, representation is also political, in that political rule is not usually direct but representative. Marx said of the peasantry that ‘they do not represent, themselves; they must be represented’”(182). Great art lives outside the moral system, and its audience, consciously or unconsciously, demands it. Howard Barker comments in his treatise *Theatre Without Conscience* thus:

Let me for the time return to the writer who thinks the purpose of his life and art is 'to make people understand one another'. I must admit that for many years when people asked me

why I wrote, I resorted to such dismal platitudes myself, though with a deep sense of bad faith...I wrote for myself. But that seemed unforgivable. Only more recently did I understand that in writing for myself I also served others, and that, in not serving myself, I could not serve others. The more self limiting an artist is, the less useful to his fellow human beings; the more he dares, the more he explores, and the more immoral he is, the better he serves. Then he or she becomes the enemy of collective lying (Brandt 59).

John Gassner extends the argument about the writer's poetic license to ply his craft without apologies to any institution, moral codes, conventions or social stratosphere by pointing out that:

The first ruling idea of modern theatre, and the one that is still dominant and most productive, although also conducive to some anarchy, is the idea of *freedom*. Its emergence was associated with the revolt of romanticism against the rigors of neo-classicism. Under the influence of romanticism, the theatre became an open rather than a closed, strictly conventionalized art. Plays will have to be judged, not by any truth of character drawing or any ingenuity of plot, which they renounce, but by the quality of their imagery, the depth of their intuition, the validity of their poetic imagination (7).

Romanus Muoneke is concerned with the proper identity of the African writer. He observes the importance of the writer to any given society as an ideological demagogue and notes their ability to offer refreshingly dissimilar perspectives. He concludes that "they are capable of rendering order, or, in reordering events in chaos, to give a semblance of understanding. They possess the capacity to express intense feelings more than ordinary people, and their affections, sympathy, and passions run deeper than we are normally accustomed to expecting"(1). Jeremy Hawthorn concludes that:

By common consent then, authorial intention differs from other sorts of intention. The writer often has no clear sense of what he or she wishes to effect in his or her readers in the way that the framer of a law has. Literary intention matures and changes as a work is written: anyone who has studied successive versions of a literary work in manuscript will have realized that authors change their mind about what they are doing (or, perhaps, that the work changes direction, and that the writer must abandon false starts and *cul-de-sacs*). Intentions have to be studied historically as well as perceived synchronically; what McGann has argued of texts is true far more of intentions - they change and develop. Writers' intentions are the opposite of simple. Firstly, they can vary from writer to writer

and work to work... Intention is not just what goes on in a writer's head. It is a constant-process (74).

Contemporary dramatists like Esiaba Irobi and Ahmed Yerima, focus on characterization to reveal the intricate textual fabric of the play's world. Psychologists have developed a personality test that tries to establish the position of the individual on the satisfier-maximizer scale. A choice maximizer is one who always seeks the very best option from a choice set, and may fret after he has made a choice in confusion about the appropriateness of the selection. Satisfiers sometimes set high standards but contend themselves with a good choice, and place less priority on making the best choice. These two playwrights can be placed on the satisfier maximise analytical balance in the sense that they might set out to create radical protagonists and revolutionary heroes that will cause a realignment of the society's conscience but what the writers might end up creating is an ideological character encumbered by the writers' philosophy towards the world.

Both writers could be accused of creating violent self-serving characters whose heroic stature appear to be non-conformist with the general stock of heroism, but they don't mind this failing once the character passes the ideology to the audience. While Ahmed Yerima sculpts his characters' philosophical optimism on a certain spiritual transcendence, Irobi quickly dismantles the God entity and places man's fate squarely on his resolve and right to choice viz.:

NIMI: I did not ask anyone to rescue me. Now I shall be labeled a vulture. Oh god! Why did they rescue me? I should have been allowed to be shot and die for the glory of the land.(Yerima 9)

The idealistic leaning of Yerima's hero is also paralleled in another Esiaba Irobi's play, *Nwokedi* where the eponymous hero, Nwokedi seems to lengthen Jamike's philosophy thus:

NWOKEDI: Mother, I will not wait for God...

MRS NWOKEDI: Why, Nwokedi?

NWOKEDI: Because when man waits for God to act and God does not act, man takes up the role of God and acts. That is why he created us in his own image. (Irobi 9)

A character becomes visible through what he says, what he thinks or what other people say about him. He exists in what his actions under trying situations reveal his true nature to be. There are simple and complex characters but generally when playwrights wish to tell a good story, they create a central character through whose unique perspective we can penetrate the play's life and investigate other characters and actions. In choosing this unique personality as a mouthpiece

witness of his story, the writer gives him a mission, imbues him with pertinent characteristics to fit into the role he has been given, and gives him the motivation for his mission. In creating this peculiar individual with ideal qualities the playwright creates oppositional agents to his goal advancement, and humanizes him by giving him an imperfect quality that would make his situation more realistic and believable.

CONCLUSION

As Martin Esslin declares “if violence is used to heighten your sense of awareness of the world in such a way that the shock that has been administered to you makes you *more* capable of evaluating the reality of the situation you are in, then this villain has been rightly used and is ethically defensible. If the violence deprives you of your autonomy, forces you to act in way that you would not otherwise want to, it is illegitimate”(132). Richard Janaro advocates a new order and approach to literary interpretation. This type of interpretation which is hermeneutic in nature argues for a scientific approach to the serious business of interpretation.

As humans there is need for us to be humanists. Janaro makes a humanist pitch in this regard stating that:

the time has come to narrow the gap. The humanist of today should be the educated person of today, and this includes everyone. In addition to imparting the tremendous amount of information all of us need to survive in today's world, education must make each of us fully aware of what it means to be a functioning human being, creating for others or appreciating what the creations of others mean for us. Humanism in the broadest sense of the term must bring us all "closer together.

Symbols possess a quality of a plethora of possible interpretations that develop the complete intentionality of their symbolic meaning. Theatre makes the audience believe and does not like a lawyer solicit logical evidence to argue its case. The improper heroes depicted in Esiaba Irobi and Ahmed Yerima's works have certain values which are commonly accepted by the Nigerian populace from the Northern region to the Niger Delta. These reconfigured values and ideals have occasioned the reevaluation of heroes to understand how these social constructs are constantly shaped and reshaped.

In Irobi's *The Other Side of the Mask*, Jamike, the central character of the play, lives an outcast life due to his grievance with the society especially the art world which has refused to

confer him with the highest sculptural award for his sculptures. Jamike has a high sense of his worth and greatness and cuts a dejected solitary figure in his desolate habiliments. His flawed introjective character and excitable disposition to violence opens a sympathetic window into the rejected artist's mind. In Yerima's *Hard Ground*, the hero, Nimi, offers another powerful message to the establishment which expects the writer to create characters that just carry out demonstrations and peaceful agitations for their rights. Nimi's assassination of the Don at the close of the play is a powerful metaphor for the revolution that will definitely occur one day when the masses become wise to their captive state and rise to throw off the yoke of bondage. Remorseless murder is a hallmark of the abnormal heroes created by these twosome and they are unabashed in their depictions.

The language of these writers' works is mostly twisted with an ambiguous binary meaning which signs are deduced according to a procedure of meaning-making requiring initiation into the mode of reading derived from that particular style of decoding. While both writers have idealist youthful heroes preaching revolution, Irobi's hero adopts a moralist Marxist ground-standing in comparison to Yerima's introspective indecisive hero. These two Nigerian writers have emphasized individuals' peculiar attributes and plied a humanist theory which delineates a person's inherent goodness and his natural proclivity to rise to higher levels of functioning. Their plays do more than entertain; they provide commentary in implicit or explicit terms, on the major existential happenings in our society.

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