

A Study of Postmodern Ideology in the Drama of Selected Nigerian Playwrights

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Abstract

The banality of postmodern drama has given rise to the dynamic level of creativity in dramatic composition, transposition and experimentations of various issues in the society. The approach to such issues abhors not the pretentious manners of modern approach as dramatist deliberately infuses actor's consciousness to live within and outside the dramatisations of drama. This paper therefore studies postmodern ideology in selected works of two Nigerian Playwrights. Through contents analysis methods of research, the study explores various elements of postmodernism within the socio-political reality of Nigeria. It that the term "postmodernism involves a radical re-thinking of representational strategies, and with this, a question of our underlying assumptions about how "meanings" are produced especially as against the emotional drench of classical and modern dramas.

Keywords: Postmodernism; Ideology; Drama; Elements; Radical.

Introduction

It is a clear fact that:

We live in a pluralized culture surrounded by a multiplicity of style, knowledge, stories, that we tell ourselves about the world. To attempt to impose an overarching narrative on such experience is to perpetuate the violence of modernity with their exclusions and terrors. (Riceland and Waugh, 2001, p.326).

The above statement graphically captures the length and breadth of the philosophical ladder of postmodernism in all our life endeavour including theatre. However, the survey of critical studies in knowledge and philosophy can be said to have started many years or century before the wake of philosophical pronouncement of Plato to Aristotle, Horace, Longinus down to the later modern era. From those eras of Plato especially the most pronounced era of Aristotle; classicism, many literary studies have sprung up as a result of ever increasing advancement in knowledge and human technological development which has witnessed several inventions, counter-invention and re-inventions of many "isms" such as Aristotelian Criticism, Russian Formalism, Archetypal Criticism, New Criticism, Phenomenological criticism, Modern forms of Feminist criticism, structure criticism, stylistics, and many others. To this Ogene (2010, p.1) says that:

The world at its present state of development has recorded many new ideas that far outweigh human memory. European and other nations of the early world civilizations like Greece, Rome and Egypt have at one time or the other articulated different philosophical ideas popularly classified as the isms. In literature, writers have reacted to these ideas through their creative outputs. Writers that have made names are those who really had something new to offer to the world.

All of them have tried to position and re-position what they perceive as truthful and objective to measure human existence in life through literature, films and even in architectural design.

Literature Review

Postmodernism, must be the most over-and under-defined this is because, Hutcheon (2000, p.1), believes that it is “accompanied by a grand flourish of negativized rhetoric: we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy, and anti-totalitarization”. To him the avalanches of names are not only confusing but also misleading. He however sees it as “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges – be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, television, music, philosophy, aesthetics theory, psychoanalytical, linguistics and historiographic” (2000, p.1).

It is important to note that no definite date that can be traced to be the rise and fall of postmodernism. Like all other stylistic eras, postmodernism has many possible reference points, like being assumed to start in 1941 when the Irish novelist: James Joyce and his British counterpart, Virginia Woolf died. Other sources trace postmodernism to the aspect of an indication of:

Reaction against modernism in the beginning of the Second World War (with its disrespect for human rights, just confirmed in the Geneva Convention, through the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Holocaust, the bombing of Dresden, the fire-bombing of Tokyo, and Japanese American Internment). Postmodernism could also imply a reaction to significant post-war events: the beginning of the Cold War, the civil rights movement in the United States, post colonialism (postcolonial literature), and the rise of the personal computer (cyberpunk fiction and hypertext fiction) (Ryan, 2003, p.4).

There are further arguments that the publications of significant literary texts marked the beginning of postmodern literature. The first performance of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953 is marked by some people as the starting point of postmodernism as well as the first publication of *Howl* in 1956 or of *Naked Lunch* in 1959. For others, postmodernism started with the moments in critical theory like that of Jacques Derrida's "Structure; Sign and Play" lecture in 1966 or as late as Ihab Hassan's usage in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* in 1971. In all the circumstances above, it should be noted that the prefix "post" does not necessarily however imply a new era, but could rather suggest a reaction against modernism.

Essentially, term postmodernism was first used in the 1950s by critics concerned to describe what they perceived to be new kinds of literary experiment arising out of but moving beyond those of cultural modernism. By the early eighties, the term shifts from the description of a range of fragmentation, to a use which encompasses a more general shift in thought and seems to register a pervasive cynicism about the progressive ideals of the enlightenment. It thus comes to encompass a constellation of preoccupations involving “repudiations of foundationalism (the idea that knowledge can be grounded in secure a priori principles) a range of aesthetics practices which disrupts the modernist concept of artistic autonomy, and a variety of attempts to describe the present cultural mood or condition” (Waugh, 2001, p.345). The term is now used to describe both the contemporary cultural conditions per se and a diverse range of intellectual responses which appear in part actually to construct that condition.

By the repudiation, it further means the total rejection of the *idea of a rational coherent subject, and the end of grand narratives of universal truth or ideas such as Marx's theory of progressive development of productive forces*. It is best thought of according to Hutcheon (2000, p.345) as a mood arising out of a sense of the collapse of all “*those foundations of modern thoughts which seemed to guarantee a reasonably stable sense of truth, knowledge, self and value. The refusal to separate domain has in fact, absorbed both knowledge and experience into the realm of the aesthetic*”. Event scientific knowledge becomes a fiction: because there are no objective facts, for fact, too are produced through forms of observation and discourse determined by theoretical (fictional) frames. To this Baudrillard (1983, p.151) sees postmodernism as *a condition of hyperinflation of the aesthetics, for art is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality*”.

The postmodern would be that which, in the moderns put forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself. Lyotard, (1984, pp.330-337) reinforces this thus:

that at which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to import a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. a postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work.

For How (2003, p.144) postmodernism stands for:

A broad term, which refers to twentieth century cultural changes in art, architecture, literature, music and film. Like post structuralism it attends to the lack of fixity in the meaning of things, dwelling painfully, sometimes ironically on life in a consumer society, but generally celebrating the advent of this new kind of life.

Arguing that postmodernism has its concentration on music, shopping and film when it comes to the field of sociology, How further spells out the emphasis of the concept on "the increasingly fluid nature of gender definitions, or on the way social identity now depends on the consumption of commodities and what they signify, rather than social class or other traditional factors" (How, 2003, p.144).

On postmodernism's relationship with linguistics, How (2003) opines that:

More abstractly, and drawing on the poststructuralist idea that reality is a linguistic construct, it undermines the validity of modernist notions of 'truth', 'reason' and 'progress' arguing that they are western inventions and thus the product of a particular view of what counts as a reasonable, truthful or progressive, not the supra-historical, universal ideas the West claims.

One obvious fact elicited from the points above is the actual meaning of postmodernism is daily passing through questioning and new definitions. One constant notion that comes out of this critical idea is that postmodernism has to do with a radical rethinking of different fields that go with it. To the postmodernist, "the world is meaningless. Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense", (Oghene, 2010, p.4). Some of the proponents of this movement in the western world include the likes of John Barth (1930), Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007), Doctorow (1931), Robert Coover (1932), William Burroughs (1914-1977), Thomas Pynchon (1937), and Don DeLillo (1936), among others. In the theatrical or a practical experimentation of the postmodern theatre in the late 19th and early 20th century, playwrights whose thought and work influenced "the aesthetics of postmodernism include Swedish dramatist, August Strindberg, the Italian author Luigi Pirandello and the German playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht" (Oghene, 2010, p.11) among others.

Common Themes and Techniques often associated with Postmodern Drama

The common themes and tendencies in the theatre of postmodernism are, irony, playfulness, black humour, pastiche, metafiction, temporal distortion, technoculture and hyperreality, paranoia, maximalism, etc.

Playfulness

This notion of playfulness is influenced by the belief that there is nothing that is real in life and thus no one is to pretend or serious of any real existence. This is usually noticeable in the performance process whereby actors are conscious of their roles and try as much as possible to delineated personal self from any role they are playing. To them (i.e. postmodernists), the artist is important, and the possible solution to the artist's "ruin" is to play within the chaos. The act of

playfulness is the central theme and the actual achievement of order and meaning is hardly taken into consideration. It usually tag as actor's theatre.

Pastiches

It can be a combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on situations in post modernity: for example; in the works of literature where science fiction, detective fiction, fairy tales, etc are used jointly to create a textbook. Although pastiche commonly refers to the mixing of genres, many other elements are also included. Elements like metafiction and temporal distortion are common in the broader pastiche of the postmodern play.

Histographic Metafiction

This term was coined by Linda Hutcheon to refer to works that fictionalize actual historical events or figures; in some cases the term is referred to as faction. Examples of African playtexts are Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* (2006), Thomas Ajayi's *Moremi*, Isiaka Aliagan's *Oba Mama*, Toyin Abiodun's *The Trial of Afonja*, Ahmed Yerima's *Attaihru*, *Ameh Oboni: The Great*, and among others.

Temporal Distortion

In postmodern theatre, temporal distortion is used in a variety of ways, often for the irony. Historiographic metafiction is an example of this. Temporal distortion was commonly used in modernist fiction, but fragmentation and non-linear narratives are central features of both modern and postmodern literature. This is commonly seen in the theatre of Bertolt Brecht with his deliberate use of projector to distract the audience emotional involvement in a production.

Tecnoculture and Hyperreality

Fredric Jameson called postmodernism the "cultural logic of late capitalism". "Late capitalism" as a term implies that society has moved past the industrial age and into the information age. Jean Baudrillard (1983) on the other hand claimed that post modernity was defined by shift into "hyperreality in which simulations have replaced the real". People are overwhelmed with information in post modernity, technology has become a central focus in many lives, and our understanding of the real is mediated by simulations of the real. Many works of fiction have dealt with this aspect of post modernity with characteristic irony and pastiche.

Post Modernism and its attendant features in selected plays

Postmodernist, stands to negate the idea of structure and superstructure of the capitalist state by creating distinctions and counter-distinction between elitist arts that is favorable to conventional ideologies and popular arts of the emerging ideologies in the society. As a reaction against the high handedness of the stratification of the society, postmodernist thought is the sole idea behind Femi Osofisan's *No more the Wasted Breed* (1982). Femi Osofisan's ideology and dramatic postulations disrobe superstitions and solicits collective will and struggle to address myriads of problems in the society. He believes so much in the ability of literature to address and stem the tide of oppression – to save humans from perishing. His desire is not to make literature to entertain alone but to teach through radical thinking.

As against Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed, No More the Wasted breed* (1982) clearly antagonizes the conventional practice of condemning a particular lineage to self-suicide in the name of communal redemptions. The play condemns the practice of human sacrifice with a substitute of animal blood. This belief is equally negated in the *Women of Owu* as overlearning on the gods breeds willful complacency to take certain developmental decisions in the society. He believes that gods are useless without anyone to placate them; hence we should stop wasting human lives where animal blood can suffice. Also, postmodernism negates the categorization placed on arts by genre distinctions, but places more emphasis on pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness. In the postmodern theatre, there is no ultimate or an imposition of genre on the audience. Audience at the liberty to choose at it appeals to them. This is why playwrights like Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima, usually face the question genre classification with their plays. Also

the idea of playfulness is mostly common to the postmodern directors. They stage a play with absolute sense of playfulness whereby actors will be conscious of their world of disillusionment as they (actors) come in and out of performance. Example is Adeoye's *The Smart Game*. In the play, the consciousness of actors is created to the extent of having freedom to switch roles in the course of the play. This is a noe-alienation effect which stands as an independent entity.

Furthermore, postmodernism upholds reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in fiction and short stories), ambiguity, simultaneity. This is evident in Adeoye's Neo-Alienation Style. The theatrical style allows the use of devices like captions, projector to show inscriptions informing audience that theatre is a confined wall of imaginations where assumed replica of human experiences are demonstrated with openness of consciousness that devoid deep emotional attachment. Device of songs, switch of roles and narrators are sometimes used to quickly break audience and actors from the soak of emotions in the progress of any performance. However, the main concentration of Postmodernism is on the de-structured, decentered and dehumanized subject. Postmodernism has a non-lackadaisical attitude to the meaninglessness of life, but just take meaninglessness with joy and non-challantness, (i.e. if the world is without meaning, there is no need to pretend that art can make meaning, but men should just play with the nonsense). This usually surfaces in the theatre of Alienation of Adeoye through unexpected playful interjection of audience in the streams of actors' thought on stage. For instance in the Smart game, members of the orchestra interrupts the thinking line of Oloriebi and Eburn intermittenly on some in form of advice and mimicry. This idea is to show that theatre is a world of openness where no one has a predetermined solution to all the perceived problems in life.

Both modernism and postmodernism are however viewed as cultural formations that go along with particular stages of capitalism. The phases of capitalism that dictates this particular cultural practices include what kind of art and literature is produced, all the spheres of influence of art and literature and monopoly capitalism, including the multinational or consumer capitalism (with emphasis on marketing, selling, and consuming commodities, not on producing them). This can be view in *Tegoni* as the world we know, insist that as a woman, Tegoni must not venture into sculpture profession just because of the belief that only male are allowed to do be a bronze caster. It is this fixation of social belief that Tegoni fights alongside with her friends. Equally, in postmodern society, it is believed that there are no originals, but only copies ... or what Jean Baudrillard (1983) calls "simulacra". If one talks of a painting or sculpture, the original work exists with highest values attached to it, but there could be other copies produced out of the original. This is because postmodern theatre actually stands to demean an existing order before it so, it has to copiously rely on a particular existing framework so as to project its characteristics. Example is the *Tegoni* by Osofisan, *No more the wasted bread* (1982) and others.

Postmodernism is concerned with questions of the organization of knowledge. Although knowledge was good for its own sake, in the postmodern society, knowledge is functional as one learns from things not to know them, but to use the knowledge. Not only is knowledge characterized by its utility in postmodern societies, but knowledge is distributable, storable, and differently arranged in postmodern societies than in modern ones. Like Osofisan demonstrated in some his plays, histories and folklores are usually remolded not teach them but to sermonise the society for a new society. As usual with Osofisan's drama, the sub-texts to *Once upon Four Robbers* (1980) are based on Yoruba culture and the Nigerian political situation. The dramatist uses the Yoruba storytelling tradition; he also responds to the contemporary social problem of armed robbery and the inability of the government to provide a credible solution.

Yoruba storytelling tradition features Ijapa, the tortoise, as a trickster in many stories. The particular story that Osofisan derives his play from involves the tortoise stealing from his fellow animals. Once, as the story goes, there was famine and drought in the land. All the animals decided to dig a well to provide water but the tortoise refused to join them. For his attitude, the animals banned him from using water from the well and when they finished digging, they posted a guard to secure the area. At night, the tortoise, in disguise, came singing and dancing; the guard

fled and the tortoise drew as much water as he could. He continued stealing water from the well until the animals constructed a wooden figure and coated it with gum paste, which, of course, could not run away from the tortoise. Surprised at the insolence of the 'gum-man', the tortoise slapped and kicked the figure and became stuck. The other factor that contributed to the drama was the incidence of public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria in the 1970s. One of the major consequences of the Nigerian civil war was armed robbery, which became widespread and violent.

In the 1970s, convicted armed robbers were executed by a military firing squad and members of the public were invited to witness the event at the Lagos Bar Beach and other public places, such as the central market or the army firing range. These regular occurrences at the Lagos Bar Beach became known as the 'Bar Beach Show'. There was public condemnation of the executions, and Osofisan responded by presenting a moral argument against the practice.

As post modernist drama, the playwright uses the elements of intertextuality and cultural codes of the Yorubas to respond and gives people the alternatives solutions to the societal problems as against the governmental or institutionalized belief in the public execution as a way out of the national predicaments. As witnessed in some of Osofisan's plays like *Morountodun*, *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), *Twingle Twangle: A Twyning Tayle*, *Many Colour....*, Umukoro argues that "a note of caution" should be passed "to the audience/readers and thus, guide their response to radicalism in Nigerian drama" because, a close analysis of the new plays (the radical plays) reveals crude delineation of character, inadequacies of plot and unskillful handling of myth. Also, the alternative politico-economic order they envision is limited in its relevance to Nigerian society. Umukoro posits that the characters in *Morountodun*, apart from Titubi who undergoes transition, do not develop, they are static, they are not "individualized", and the mode of characterization "is based on certain assumption which is very hard to accept". Umukoro (2000, p. 231) further points out:

The radical plays are composed of stereotypes – characters who do not live, just images used to express the various pre-existing dogmas on Marxism transferred to the Nigerian setting. Beside the aesthetic flaws of this practice, it has concealed the real enemies of the masses of the Nigerian people. In addition, the plays seek the solution to the crisis in doctrinaire socialism thereby stressing the abundance of material wealth instead of equal rights and justice as the precondition for socialism in Nigeria... Also, commitment to Marxism has befogged the sensibility of Nigerian radical dramatists; so much that they are unresponsive to the valid ways to national development enshrined in their culture and mythical past.

To us, this Umukoro's observations only confirms the true nature of what postmodernist stands for since knowledge cannot be pinned down to a particular model of understanding. This is because postmodern art often makes it a point of demonstrating in an obvious way the instability of meaning. This is most frequently done by assaulting or playing with the standard, traditional categories that we use to understand the world. Much postmodern art breaks down traditional ways of practicing art; a classic example is performance art, which itself was originally a radical mixture of dance, visual arts, music, and many other artistic elements in ways that people had a hard time identifying, or understanding in any easy way. Once the work of art is created, it becomes a product for all of us to interpret in our own way. The artist's interpretation, according to Whisnant (2013), of his/her own work "should not necessarily take priority over anyone else interpretations. All interpretations are by nature equally valid, at some level, since there is no "ultimate truth" to compare interpretation".

This interpretation tends to prioritize the intentions of the artist over all. Postmodernists, though, would suggest that, first, the ultimate meaning intended by the author can never really be known, since that presupposes the existence of a kind of "internal truth of the artist" which simply does not exist. Postmodern engagement emanates from "the yearning to do intellectual work that

connects with habits of being, forms of artistic expression and aesthetics that inform the daily life of writers and scholars as well as a mass population (Hooks, 2001, p.368).

Like Osofisan, for example, Larry McCafferry sees it as both metafictionally self-reflective and:

Yet speaking to us powerfully about real political and historical realities: it has thus become a kind of model for the contemporary writer, being self-conscious about its literary heritage and about the limit of mimesis...but yet managing to reconnect its reader to the world outside the page. (McCafferry, 1982, cited in Hutcheon, (2000, p.5).

One of the consequences of postmodernism seems to be the rise of religious fundamentalism, as a form of resistance to the questioning of the "grand narratives" of religious truth ('grand narratives' is a theory propounded by Lyotard and may be interpreted as a kind of metatheory, or meta-ideology, i.e. an ideology that explains an ideology as with Marxism). This usually features in the theater of Neo alienation where by the religious bigotry is expound with clear vision of people's insincerity of holiness. Instance is the killers, a social drama by Adeoye where religious extremism is used by hooligans to perpetrate evils not with the sincerity of Godliness.

Conclusion

Although the term "postmodernism" is continually undergoing interpretation and redefinition, one constant thing that emerges from the critical discourses surrounding it is a sense that postmodernism involves a radical re-thinking of representational strategies, and with this, a question of our underlying assumptions about how "meanings" are produced. Postmodern narratives are therefore frequently experimental, employing such techniques as fragmentation, intertextuality, and appropriation to fundamentally alter the way language represents the "meaning" of texts.

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