

LANGUAGE IN AFRICAN DRAMATIC LITERATURE: THE EXAMPLE OF OLA ROTIMI'S *IF... A TRAGEDY OF THE RULED*

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Abstract

*This paper discusses the use of language in African dramatic literature and identifies the controversy over the choice of a most appropriate language to be used by African playwrights and also X-rays the solution to language problem as proffered by prominent dramatic scholars. These solutions are then narrowed to Ola Rotimi and his experiment with the English Language. The effectiveness of a new brand of English language is also discussed in the area of characterization and audience receptiveness of Ola Rotimi's works and how this is achieved in *If...A Tragedy of the Ruled*.*

Introduction

Language is defined variously by Akindele Adegbite as "a system of vocal symbols by which human beings communicate ideas" (1992:3) and by R. A. Halls as "an institution through which humans communicate and interact with each other by the means of arbitrarily use of oral auditory symbols" (1956:18). Mary Ojieh sees language as an instrument used for "communicating ideas, feelings and thoughts vision and exploring our environment for developmental purposes (2004:7). Language according to the Webster's Third New International Dictionary is defined as:

The words, their pronunciation, and their methods of combining them, used and understood by a considerable community and established by long usage; A systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures or marks having understood meanings (1986: 1270).

From the various definition above, the main features of language is given as follows: a communicative instrument; an interactive medium; as oral, which means it is expressed through the oral cavity; and as being auditory; which means the receiver should be able to decode the encoded message (Bamidele, 1999:183). Language therefore, is a communication tool used by man to transmit information in a particular community. This tool of communication can be verbal or non verbal (signs, symbols). In any case, what is important is the ability of both the transmitter and the receiver to understand what is being communicated.

A Search for an Appropriate Dramatic Language

During the pre-colonial period, the African dramatic form was not documented. This is perhaps why some

earliest dramatic historians claimed that Africans had no dramatic form. Contrary to this view, it is worthy of note that Africans have, from time immemorial, a very rich and robust dramatic and theatrical practice that is peculiar to them, except that unlike the whites who had for a long time the technical know-how for documentation, Africans relied only on the very good old documentation process of oral transmission which included folk stories like mythical/legendary tales and ritualized performances. These performances were done and documented orally in our indigenous language called Mother Tongue which "is usually... referred to as L1 or first language used often and one which a person thinks in (Shobomehin, 2004:18). The first contact we had with the colonialist was characterized with a gross inability to communicate effectively with them even in the area of trade. Part of their colonialisation agenda was to re-orientate the blacks in their language which eventually with time became a second language. Most Africans who had contact with them developed the ability to communicate, even though they did so in corrupt English which has now developed to become Pidgin English. The colonial masters also started educating their colonies in their language, hence, Nigeria adopted the English language, while other Francophone countries adopted French as its "Lingua Franca". This, no doubt, is the reason the earliest literary dramatic writers in Nigeria, wrote their plays in English language, a language that is not accessible to the generality of the Nigerian populace due to a high level of illiteracy even with education being a priority agenda of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Sam Ukala cited Obi Wali in "Folkism..." as calling English language which is the language we were schooled in an "elitist" language (1996:280). In Nigeria for example, there has been calls that creative writers should abandon the use of English and write in their indigenous language. Alex Johnson also cited Obi Wali as observing that "Until African writers accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African language, they would merely be pursuing a dead end which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration" (1982:2). This abandonment of the English language for an indigenous one according to Ukala, is impossible since to him:

The Nigerian writer in English may be incapable of writing proficiently in his/her indigenous language. In any case, orthography has been developed for only a few Nigerian languages and mass literary in others may take a long time to achieve (1996:280).

If the quest for the use of our indigenous language cannot be adhered to, the next alternative that will come to mind is the use of Pidgin English. As we know, Pidgin English is popularly spoken and understood by a reasonable number of Nigerians. Its use however will be totally inadequate in solving our language problem since the masses need to be educated even to be able to read dramatic works written in pidgin. As regards its inadequacy, Sam Ukala warns that it may "be counterproductive" to hastily discard the English Language. (1996:280).

The English language especially with the way it has been used by prominent Nigerian playwrights has been used only to communicate to/with those schooled in its mechanics in our society. Chinue Achebe is one

Nigerian writer and critic who has called against the use of difficult English. In his opinion, the African Literary dramatist should, "modify or alter the English language using two main devices: translation of [West African mother tongue] locations especially the proverb and transference, with or without cushioning of untranslated items" (Alex John, 1982:6). In the view of J.P. Clark: "Poetic Shakespearean solution which essentially entails the manipulation of imagery; the naturalistic solution by which writers... create an idiom which differentiates and promotes verisimilitude" (Alex, 1982:7) should be used. From the suggested solutions made by Clark, it is very obvious that his practice supports his approach since in his plays, the mode of communication is basically through a range of images and image clusters which characterizes the society in its naturalistic form; portrays its culture and also indicate character types and language as exemplified in *Ozidi* and *Song of a Goat*. Another scholar who thinks literary dramatic writers should experiment with the English language is Femi Euba. He suggests that "Nigerian playwrights dwell on ways and means of using the English language to the fullest." (1981:395).

In spite of these recommendations, it is obvious that only a few of our literary playwrights have been able to write in the language that have gained tremendous acceptance by the audience. Some of these playwrights are Femi Osofisan, and Ola Rotimi. Other playwrights include Sam Ukala, in *Brake a Boil*, *Placenta of Death*, *The Slave Wife*, *The Last Heroes*, *Odour of justices* etc., Irene Isoken Salami in *Emotan*, *More Than Dancing*, Tess Onweme in *The Broken Kalabash*, *The Reign of Wazobia*, and Okoye Chuks in *Poison* and *We The Beast*.

Ola Rotimi's Biography

Emmanuel Gladstone Olawale Rotimi was born on 3rd April, 1938 in Sapele in the defunct Bendel State now Delta State. At an early age of four, he was introduced into acting by his father. Later in secondary school, Rotimi acquired interest in playwriting, short stories, and poetry. Between 1959 and 1966, Rotimi trained in the art of playwriting and directing at the Universities of Boston and Yale in the United States of America. Over the years, Rotimi learned a lot from foreign and indigenous playwrights like Shakespeare, O'Neil, Miller, Pinter and Brecht. The influence of Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Ogunde, Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo and as his contemporary, Femi Osofisan, has been in the direction of utilizing traditional materials and integrating such elements as proverbs, music, dance and traditional linguistic idioms (Gbeliekaa, 1997:149)

A look at the training and influences on Ola Rotimi by his mentors, tutors and contemporaries shows that he was positively influenced by them and his environment. Ola Rotimi strived endlessly, to communicate with the uneducated and unenlightened in his community. This quest to reach all and sundry through his works influenced his use of simplified language as most appropriate for the Nigerian audience. He had a lot of problem though in deciding which, what, and how general English language should be adequately utilized in realizing his goals. He laments that "as a writer, my business is to use words to address the human condition. To use words, I need language...." (1991:14). With regard to his dilemma on how to adequately utilize the English language, he said:

How do I domesticate that egregiously foreign language? English I had concise persons within the span from a primary six passed, to a professor of English. It was my aim that such persons should be able to understand my thoughts allowing of course for varying levels of perception and judgment among their ranks (1991:15).

For the purpose of accessibility, Ola Rotimi's writings reflect what Ukala calls "Indigenized English". Indigenized English according to him:

Is broadly like the language of African. Folktale in performance; easy to comprehend; dramatic (that is easy to articulate because of its short and/or balanced sentence structure; pleasurable to hear because of its music, made by alliteration, assonance, repetition, Rhythm, and Rhyme) and rich in idiophone, an extra-lexical sound which suggest meaning by creating a mental picture (1996:231).

Ola Rotimi's experiment on how to domesticate the English language for literary consumption started in 1965 with the *Gods are not to Blame* which was an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. He summed the objective of his first experiment as "a conscious effort to temper with the English language so as to temper its "Englishness" (1991:14). The tempering with the English language was done in two ways. He describes them as:

First: Simplicity in the choice of words for my dramatic writing. I normally employ monosyllabic, disyllabic, and rarely tri-syllabic words. Second: The arrangement of these words syntactically, that is in this regard, I have tried to imitate the cadence of traditional African speech (1991:14).

Use of Language in If... A Tragedy of the Ruled

This aspect is discussed in relation to characterization, language structure and speech phraseology. The first character we shall discuss is Papa.

Papa:

In the play, Papa is seen in the play as an epitome of struggle, a symbol of stability and strength from whom every member of the compound draw their inspiration and advice. As a leader, his language is very simple and easily understood by everybody. From Hamidu, the Doctor through Adiagha, a common house wife, to Betty, a single lady whose main language is seen in pages 14/15, when he addressed the members of the compound against selling their conscience through their vote.

PAPA: But we must bide our time. Everything really depends on our votes, which brings me back to my dustbin picture. I said the dustbin presents the most sincere reflection of value of our people (If..., 1984:14 & 15).

The above language used by Papa is simple, but in spite of its simplicity, papa is able to communicate in simple nuances political matters that someone in the political parlance would have found very difficult to relay to some of the people gathered. Apart from the simplified language structure. We see the use of parable, and vivid imagery in the speech. Papa's speech pattern is an example of a typical African elder communicating with his kin's men.

Hamidu. Hamidu in the play is a Medical Doctor who has just completed his training and is serving the nation in the National Youth Service Corp scheme. But because of the problem of accommodation despite his class, he found himself living in the same environment with others. His language unlike that of papa is not very simple but can be categorized as "elitist". He constantly speaks in refined English. This kind of English is what Ola Rotimi believes to be the "hallmark" of mixist scholarship. Hamidu's speech pattern is exemplified in his speech on mass oppression and the Chosification of Garruba.

Hamidi: That's right. That is if the masses, the oppressed masses again for a change will use their votes as tools for their own freedom... the day our solidarity dissolves is the day our humanity ends, and our worthlessness begins. Like our brother here Garuba Kazaure....now a new man. The way the system prefers him to be a new man totally dehumanized, totally chosified.... (If..., 1984:16&17)

Chinwe: Chinwe on the other hand, is a graduate of mathematics who because of economic difficulties sacrifices all her university education living in a ramshackle house with almost nothing to show for all her achievement than for the up-keep of her nephew who is her only source of inspiration. Economic and environmental factors influenced and afflicted her language pattern so much that if not for Hamidu, no one would have suspected she had a university degree.

Banji: Banji Falegan alias "D. law" is a lawyer by profession but had never practiced. According to him in Happening 1, he admonished Mama Rosa to tell the Fisherman the following "Banji: 'Tell him. Government has not given me licence to practice as a lawyer. (If..., 1984:27). Banji's English is also refined and can be categorized as having the same sentence structure as Hamidu. He easily delves from simple English pattern to normal colloquial English as often as the need arises. Banji is also a Marxist and in alliance with Hamidu, he plays with the word 'chosification'. "Banji: ...fication chosification: the turning into a THING... Banji: Yes-The Capitalist Paper Tigers can go to any length." (If...984:18).

Akpan:

Akpan is an example of a typical Nigerian. He is a semi-illiterate man who believes in working very hard. He dreams to get to the top some day, despite economic hardship. His wife left him on this account. Akpan's English is also very simple and can be said to be colloquial and similar to that of Papa. He picked up most of his verbose vocabularies from his dealings and relationship with others in his struggle through life. This way, he is equipped with a brand of English that helped enrich his language pattern. An example is seen in the following conversation:

Akpan: Nobody is given me false hopes! I know what I want in life. It may take long to get it, but once there is life, there is hope. Ok so I've passed stage II RSA... now, there are thousands like me. Born strugglers. Some with wives lose their wives in the course of the struggle for success. ... so long as I know that my struggle is ultimately for the good of my wife and child, I remain undaunted. Finish. Che Guevara! I'll come for dictation this night if you don't mind.... (If..., 1984:42).

Betty Oyiamwen:

Betty is a typical example of a Nigerian who has travelled far and wide to see the good things of life but without an education and a viable skill. The only education she has is what she picked from the calibre of people she interacts with. The only kind of language she can communicate with/in apart from her mother tongue is pidgin which is easily the most used language in every part of Nigeria. Betty is so versatile in decoding this language that even when it is wordlessly communicated, she easily decodes it. We see this in the opening of the play, where woman one and woman two are engaged in a wordless gossip against her: "Woman 1: mhh...mhh....mhh....mhh! Woman 2:mmhn....mmhm.....mmhm!..." (If..., 1984:3). Betty's response to this wordless gossip is onomatopoeic and highly metaphorical, even though in pidgin.

Betty: I hear wetrin una talk o! Mama Uket, yourself and Mama Rosa. I hear wetin una talk. Ehen. Fowl talk cru-cru-cru-cru-cru-cru for belle, dey tink say hawk wey dey fly pass no hear am. Rubish! Hawk hear am well-well, only say him no get time for the yeye fowl. (If..., 1984:4)

Also in page 15 when addressing all the tenants at the instance of Papa, she repeats the same speech pattern.

Betty: Thank sah. My own be say: di munu-munu talk we dem dey tak me talk for this house, e too much. Ah-ah! True-true ma

and landlord de walka, but I know myself. Na who say fowl no de sweat for body, because feder no gree person see sweat?... (If..., 1983:15).

Thirdly Betty addresses Onyema thus: "Betty: (Jocose excitement) Onyens, you too go be Professor.... You na Professor proper-proper. Only say remember me, O. By dat time... [Rising to totter like an old woman] your Betty go done old kune-kuje, kuje-kuje..." (If..., 1983:22). The language accorded Betty in this play is Pigin, but a blend of Pigin that is dialectical to the Benin people of Edo state. With her speech phraseology, Ola Rotimi identifies Betty and situates her in her ethnic locality where only that brand of Benin Pidgin is spoken. Notice that a direct translation of her Pidgin to Edo language will automatically produce the same speech and word pattern with the local Edo dialect, and will resemble what has been identified in other quarters as "Yoruba-English"

Adiagha or woman and Mama Rosa are examples of a typical house wives in the lower sector of the Nigerian society. With their language pattern, we see that they are not educated. Pidgin English comes very easy with them, but they are quick to delve into native dialect (Ibibio and Kalabari) at will. Notice also that their Pidgin is modelled after their dialectical phraseology as is seen with Betty's intonation and speech pattern.

Language as a Medium of Cultural Transmission

The use of mother tongue is an experiment that Ola Rotimi advanced beyond the "specificity of English". Commenting on the use of language as a medium of cultural transmission as regard the use of mother tongue, he explains that his:

stylistic technique has since reached out to engulf traditional languages. Again, the aim is to accord the expressive idioms of my dramatic writing, features with which our deserve people's can identify themselves. (1991:16).

This aspect of his experimentation is a rare combination of scholastic ability and efficiency. In If..., we see a combination of different Nigerian languages in their diverse dialects. The languages used in If... are: Edo, used by Betty Oviawwen; Kalabiri used by Mama Rosa and Fisherman, Ibibio by Adiagha. Betty Oviawwen exclaims in Edo language at the brilliant comparison Onyema made between Mr. Peters the Scouts Master, Hamidu also known as "Ernesto Che Guevara" and Banji. She exclaim,s "Iye me!" (If..., 1983:24). This means "My Mother" in Edo language. Adiagha speaks Ibibio at the slightest provocation. There is hardly a point in her speech that she did not accentuate in Ibibio. For instance, Adiagba as Woman 1 in Happenings one to Garuba and Ukot her son:

“Woman 1: Garuba want watah? [Gestures overtly to GARUBA as she speaks] Wait small... watah come... hear?[addressing boy roughly in Ibibio] Afo anam Nso ke Ndo? Sob idem ben mon uye idem oro sok Garuba. Na sime ntu'uso!” (If...,1983:4).

Later to her husband: Idat nma odo, Betty, abo ete ki onyie ufo the ama ono nwed O' Usoke (If...,1983:9), etc.

From the above, we can see how brilliantly Ola Rotimi has handled the multilingual problem of language with his experiment with the mother tongue. With this, he has been able to solve the problem he set out to resolve when he said that:

African literature today should no longer dwell on why must African authors write in European language?... rather, the debate should most usefully focus on: How... How does the African writer handle that problem so as to make it more accessible to his people? (1991:11).

Femi Osafisan has described Ola Rotimi works as multilingual in nature and capable of reaching anybody in any class of the society. According to him, the languages in Rotimi plays are very astonishing. In his dialogue, he uses as many languages as are naturally spoken by members of his cast.... The lesson for our country as well as other in Black Africa, where the complex multiplicity of language has been the most formidable barrier to the forging of a national identity and the achievement of a national identity. (1999:3). Ola Rotimi's last experiment is in *Hopes of the living Dead*. This play showcases a rear combination of 15 (fifteen) Nigerian languages. Amongst them are Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Nembe, Idoma, Kalabari, Tiv and Urohbo.

Conclusively, Ola Rotimi in this play, even though written more than two decades ago, exemplifies at its very best a multilingual approach in resolving a problem that has been and is still an enigma confronting literary dramatic writers both old and new. It is recommended therefore, that playwrights should imbibe in their approach to the use of language, a cross-cultural linguistic culture in order to capture as Ola Rotimi did, not just the literate, or semi-literate in our society, but a broader spectrum of audience especially the 'unschooled' (the informally uneducated) since theatre is a medium of entertainment/education to ensure that they can be educated by seeing for themselves as through the mirror, issues facing them and with solutions proffered by the theatre. It is also recommended that adequate research be done in undertaking the multi-linguistic approach so that phraseologies and dialectical differences can be adequately resolved. Perhaps, there is no better way to conclude this paper than to use Alex Johnson's comment on Ola Rotimi's work as cited by Atanda Kemi. He surmises that:

Rotimi's significance as a theatre activist, lies in his innovations and experiment with the English languages, his development and infusion of traditional Africa theatrical elements and the themes of his plays (1987:3).

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