



## **Impacts of Dramatic Theory and Criticism on the Development of Drama and Theatre: A Periscopic Survey**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper discusses, periscopically, the paradigmatic impacts of critical theory and criticism on the development of drama and theatre through the ages; from the classical periods; through the medieval, the Renaissance, the Romantic, Neoclassical to the modern period of realism and naturalism. It alludes to how each of these periods as well as the postmodernist period attempts to show its own temper as being radically different from their predecessors, and how; though the reader would note, unequivocally, that the apple hardly falls far from its tree progenitor. This is how the relationship between the anti-realistic modes and their realistic cousins can be perceived and interpreted. It briefly discusses the recurrent controversies between the Western dramatic weltanschauung vis-à-vis the African cosmology in terms of the theoretical impacts of the former on the latter, concluding that the need for African theory and criticism to come of age cannot be overemphasized.

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Without a theory, facts are a mob, not an army.... W. F. Barrett*  
*Without challenge, without revolution, and without a certain degree of*  
*radicalism the world would stagnate ... Edde, M. Iji*

The word theory, according to the *Encarta Dictionary* is derived from Greek's word *theoria*; "contemplation" as well as *theoros*; "spectator". In other words, theory could be seen as certain idea gotten and postulated by a "spectator", after "contemplating" a work or phenomenon. The *Encarta Dictionary* thus defines a theory from various perspectives: as an idea or belief about something arrived at through speculation or conjecture; or a set of facts, propositions, or principles analyzed in their relation to one another and used, especially to explain phenomena; as well as a body of rules, ideas, principles and techniques that applies to a subject, especially when seen as distinct from actual practice.

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Similarly, the *Encarta Dictionary* defines criticism as an assessment of a creative work: considered judgment of or a discussion about the qualities of something especially a creative work. In other words, to criticize in the words of Iji (b) is to 'evaluate, or appraise, to analyze, to have an opinionated point of view of a particular work'.

Over the ages, different critics and theorists have come up with divergent criticisms and theories about the nature of drama. This divergence is occasioned by the very nature of art. In the pure sciences, some theories have been tested, and verified beyond all reasonable doubts, and have become laws. For instance, two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen: H<sub>2</sub>O give water. This is a law because it has been empirically verified; in every part of the world once, you add two atoms of hydrogen and an atom of oxygen you must get a molecule of water. This, however, is not the case with the arts. In the arts, there are no laws because art, like beauty, is culturally conditioned; and since the world is filled with divergent cultures, the divergent views, criticisms, and theories emanating from any work of art, be it drama, theatre, painting, sculpture etc, are self explanatory. No one can appreciate a work of art for another person, herein lies the wealth of dramatic theories and criticisms that have come down to us through the ages. A theory is predicated, however, on rational judgment, conditioned by a good degree of logic, coherence and systematic evaluation.

For us to fully grasp how theories and criticism have impacted on the development of drama and theatre, we must x-ray some of such theories and their impacts. In this dimension, therefore, our first port of call would be the classical Greece, where great philosophers first postulated on the meaning and nature of drama. Before this, however, it is apropos to state here that dramatic theory and criticism, have come a long way; through the dovetailing historical periods of this brief survey, as periscoped.

### **The Evolution of Dramatic Theory and Criticism**

If we say that drama is the imitation of man's actions, and granted that from the very beginning of creation, man has always performed an action; then one may not be too ambitious to posit that drama is as old as man himself; for according to Aristotle, the instinct of imitation (mimesis) is inborn in man. Therefore, to give in exactitude, when and how drama began is impossible as it probably began when man was yet to invent the art of writing, to properly document dramatic and theatrical events. The earliest attempts at documenting dramatic activities are found in engravings and paintings in caves. In other words, drama, and theatre predate human civilization. However, well documented records on drama and theatre in post primitive era, as we have it today, rounded with form and content was handed to man by the Greeks who perfected the arts in response to religious obligations.

By the 5<sup>th</sup> century B. C. the Greeks had perfected the art (drama) so much that dramatists were already competing for prizes. Some of the world's most outstanding plays were written and performed at this period. These

include Aeschylus' – *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroe*, *Eumenides*, (trilogy) and *Promethous Bound*; Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*; Euripides' *Medea*, *Electra* and *The Bachae*; and Aristophanaes' *The Frogs*, and *Lysistrata* to mention just a few. What is paramount to our study here is that if dramatic competitions were already held far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> century B. C., it therefore logically connotes that the Greeks also devised the yardsticks for assessing or judging them. It was through such paradigms that the art of one playwright was adjudged to have been better than those of the others. This presupposes, thus, that the art of criticism in drama and theatre has also come a long way.

Just as the arts of drama and theatre were the heritage the Greek bequeathed to man, so too is the art of dramatic criticism, wherewith dramatic works could be appreciated. The earliest available critical criteria wherewith the Greek dramatic literature was evaluated was handed over to man by the legendary Greek philosophers Plato, in his *The Republic* and compatriot and student, Aristotle in his famous *Poetics*.

The Greek philosopher Plato was among the foremost critics to speculate about the nature of drama in particular and art in general. Plato was the first to use mimesis (imitation) in application to works of art. In his *The Republic* (about 380 B.C.) Plato opines that artists are liars; they are deficient of creativity in that they only recreate that which exists in the real world; the archetypal world. He argued that artists' creations are thrice removed from the original. Furthermore, for Plato, "the appeal of dramatic poetry is not to the reason but to a lower part, the emotions, which like the senses, are subject to illusions" (333). Plato thus saw art (drama) as an illusion, and that its influence is negative. It is therefore not a surprise that he would not admit the artist into his utopian Republic since he believed that they had no space in an ideal society.

Perhaps, if there were no other critics to counter Plato's criticism on dramatic art, drama and theatre would probably, have never gained the space they have in human history. In fact, the words of Iji (1) that "without challenge, without revolution, and without a certain degree of radicalism the world would stagnate" is very apt here. Thus, Greek philosopher Aristotle who was a student of Plato came out to the 'rescue' with a very strong philosophical defense against Plato's criticism. In his treatise titled, the *Poetics* (about 330BC) Aristotle agreed with Plato that art imitates; but argues, however, that artists do not imitate that which is in the supersensible world, but that the object of imitation are the actions of man. Moreover, while Plato believed that drama may negatively impact on man, Aristotle argued that the artist's creativity is not merely copying, but: a re-presentation with universal significance. For example, the epic poet and the playwright evoke human beings in action without having to report actual events. Because the poetic approach to human action is more philosophical, in nature, than a purely historical approach, literature can show the most probable action of a person of a specific type, rather than what an actual person could do or say on a particular occasion. Even the portrayal of great suffering and death may thus, give pleasure to an audience- the pleasure of learning

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something essential about reality... tragedy cures us of the harmful effects of excessive pity, fear, and similar emotions by first inducing such emotions in us, and then pleasurably purging the emotions in the controlled therapeutic setting of theatrical experience (Hernadi).

The difference between Plato and Aristotle's theories on the nature of drama cum art was therefore ideological; while Plato was rather metaphysical and abstract, Aristotle was scientific, empirical and rather more concrete. It is important to note that Aristotle did not only counter Plato's dramatic criticism, rather he went on to theorize on the very nature of Greek dramatic landscape. In his work, *Poetics*, Aristotle dissected Greek drama in its entirety; its form, structure, content and purpose. From this theory propounded by Aristotle, we can now "operate" or "dissect" drama surgically, with the hope of fathoming a desired result; be it the meaning, style, form, or structure. Although time and space may not permit us to fully appreciate Aristotle's theory extensively here, Aristotle's conception of dramatic elements and how he conjectured the genres of drama, thereof, are worthy of synoptic contemplation in this study.

#### **Aristotle's Conception of the Elements of Drama and Definition of the Genres**

Aristotle, contemplated Greek drama, revealed that drama is made up of six distinct elements, namely theme (thought), plot, character, diction, spectacle and song. Theme, Aristotle conceptualizes as the main idea of the play, which the dramatist needs to share with the audience. Plot is the structure of the play, the framework that enables the play to possess a beginning, middle and an end. Aristotle further analyzed plot as having three parts namely exposition, complication and denouement. Characters are the people or animal in the play as the case may be through whose activities, main actions are imitated. Spectacle, to Aristotle is the visual element of drama, comprising the set, costume, props, the action, and dance. Finally, song, the song or music through which part of the action may be revealed.

These elements espoused by Aristotle gave direction to the appreciation of western drama. How various dramatists treated or manipulated each of these elements in relation to the socio-political dictates of their cultures or society is responsible for the varying dramatic literature as well as theatre in the West, and probably the world over.

The second area of Aristotle's critical paradigms is the definition of the genres, especially tragedy. He conceptualized tragedy as: an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornaments, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions (36).

This definition (theory) about the nature of tragedy has more or less become the dramatic constitution, wherewith dramatic art is appraised. Although debunked by later theorists or critics (especially, modern and postmodernists critics) it has been used for dramatic assessment; and is still being used for critical evaluation to a greater degree even till date. Some of the major highpoints of Aristotle's conception or theory of tragedy include that the tragic hero must be one of lofty height; the action must elicit or arouse deep emotional feeling in the contemplator. These two elements in Aristotle's conception of tragedy are perhaps, the root of the hullabaloo as to whether African drama could be seen as tragic or not.

A striking fact about dramatic theories and criticism since the evolution of well defined drama and theatre is that they evolve and reflect, over the ages, the essence of the prevailing age. In other words, socio-economic and political disposition of an era to a greater degree affect the theory as well as criticism that emanate from the era. This is why Aristotelian theory about tragedy, which had held sway in the classical era has received a lot of knocks from modern and postmodernist dramatists, critics, and theorists as would be seen.

With the rise of the church at the medieval era, the soul of drama took a turn from the lofty dramatic tradition of the classical age. At first, the church condemned drama in its entirety, refusing actors and dramatists the sacrament. However, when the church realized the didactic qualities of drama it later reintroduced it to make its sermon more graphic, and as a methodology of sermon. However, the church, the self imposed purveyor of cultural antecedents, bottled drama to essentially focus on the salvation of the human soul; the drama was thus allegorical with each character representing the very abstraction the drama is expected to teach.

From about the end of the medieval era however, a different worldview on the nature of man evolved. The position of the church as the gateway to salvation was greatly criticized. Man no longer looked up to the church for salvation. In the dramatic world therefore, rather than religious themes, and the stereotypic church drama, man took a retrospective journey into the archive of classical Greece and Rome to borrow more robust dramatic literature. Herein sprang the Renaissance period as well as the neoclassic era. At the neoclassic era thus, a new set of theory which extols the neoclassical ideals came into focus.

The neoclassicists pointed that drama must take some distinct form. It must have five acts, conform to the unity of time, place and action; and must also reveal a deep sense of verisimilitude. For the unity of time, drama was made to present an action that should not truncate more than twenty-four hours; the unity of place stipulated that the setting should not insult human sensibility of locating the action in several places that realistically could not be reached within the stipulated time frame; while the unity of action forbids a mixture of dramatic genres. Thus a play could either be tragedy or comedy; melodrama was forbidden. This restriction is a reflection of the kind of

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restriction in the socio-political milieu in France at this period, where class distinction was at its peak. *Microsoft Encarta* (2009) reveals this succinctly: French literature reflects the cultural and political history of France. Until the French Revolution of 1789, France had a social and political system that was arranged by rank or class, with rules governing how members of one class interacted with members of another. Every aspect of culture and society followed a hierarchal structure, including literary genres and literary styles. The above therefore explains why the neoclassicists associated tragedy, which was regarded as a loftier dramatic genre with the upper class, while comedy was located within the lower social stratum.

Lastly, the concept of decorum and verisimilitude (the appearance of truth) affected theatre and drama. The theatre was forbidden to present scenes of violence on stage; therefore scenes of war, murder, suicide were done off stage and only reported. Also, drama was restricted to showcase only probable possibilities; therefore concepts such as witches and wizards, fantasy, ghosts were not permitted in drama. Any play that flouts these laws was seriously criticized, rejected and tagged to be unworthy. This bottle-neck criticism forced drama to take a definite form. Pierre Corneille's *The Cid* is one of the plays that suffered so much criticism from the French Academy, for though conforming to some of the tenets of the neoclassic laws it flouts that of verisimilitude and decorum. This play shows the extent at which criticism and theories could affect and structure drama and theatre of an age; for in attempt to conform to the principles, Pierre Corneille, in *The Cid*, made Roderigue, who had murdered his fiancée's (Chimene) father, in a duel, in less than twenty four hours, still go ahead to marry her that same day. Although the play was rejected by the Academy for not conforming in the area of verisimilitude and decorum, Pierre Corneille was only writing to suit the prevailing theory and criticism of the time. Brockett reveals that:

Corneille himself soon accepted the judgment passed on *The Cid*, and his subsequent plays (the most famous of which are *Horace*, *Cinna* and *Polyeucte*) adhered to the new demands and helped to establish classicism as the standard of the period (171).

What this connotes is that criticism greatly impacted on the development of drama and theatre of that age. According to Brockett (223), towards the end of the eighteenth century, there was a growing distrust of reason as the major means of attaining man's highest goals. Man was deemed to attain his goals in life (as well as in the literary world) not by rational analysis which was the prevalent case in the neoclassical era, but by his natural instinct. In the socio-political arena, the rise of the middle class brought a lot of questions concerning class structure. The battle for the equality of man, therefore, came into sharp focus. Thus, by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, in France and Germany, these radical thoughts began to be reflected in the literary world; literary taste began to turn from classical and neoclassical conventions. People became fed up with the bottle-neck restrictions of the neoclassical tenets, and yearned for

a new order. From about 1800, therefore, there was a breakdown of class distinction and the consciousness of the equality of man became the emphasis. This new worldview brought about new theories, new criticism and consequently new dramatic and theatrical conventions. This is when romanticism sprang up, debunking and rejecting all the neoclassical laws.

Romanticism came with its own theory, the principal focus of which was man's freedom: freedom to be free from all inhibitions and create whatever there is love to create, and how so desired. The Romanticists therefore rejected classical and neoclassical works and rather opted for Shakespeare's works. They felt that Shakespeare created without any conventions or restriction; and that restricting plays into dramatic genres or other conventions can pose hindrance to creativity. This is also the view expressed by Wilson who pointed that:

the attempt to separate and organize plays according to categories (as was the case with the neoclassicists) can be a hindrance in developing a free and open understanding of theatre. Shakespeare makes fun of this problem in Hamlet when he has Polonius announce that the players who have come to court can perform anything: "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral" (186-187).

Thus, with this type of philosophy, the Romanticists created a wide range of subjects and genres, melodrama being their most favoured genre. Since the romanticists found all ready-made romantic works in Shakespeare, they did not create great plays of their own. However, notable writers of the era include James Sheridan Knowles (1784-1862) and Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), who is regarded as the German equivalent of Shakespeare. However, the theatre flows with the tide of time; towards the end of the mid nineteenth century, the socio-political landscape of Europe had drastically changed; giving rise to a new approach to life, and consequently new dramatic orientation. Brockett sums up the situation at the period thus:

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Romantic standard had come to seem meaningless. The belief in man's idealistic nature had received setbacks. For example, after the downfall of Napoleon around 1815, most European countries reinstated political conditions which were in many ways more oppressive than those in existence during the eighteenth century. The ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity no longer seemed to have any reality. Furthermore, the general misery of a large part of humanity was being emphasized in the results of the industrial revolution. The factory system was pouring workers into the centers of population where living conditions were daily more inadequate. Crime and poverty were prevalent (260).

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The above socio-political conditions therefore dealt a death blow, on the Romantic Movement. Man was seen not to be as free and uninhibited as the romanticists fantasized. By about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, therefore, romanticism began to give way to new literary theories. In fact, by the mid 1800 man was very critical in thought and sought to question the prevailing religious and socio-economic system of his time. Such critical consciousness paved the way for new philosophers and consequently, new philosophy about life and the socio-political environment. From the works of such great writers and philosophers like Charles Darwin and Carl Marx, came new beliefs on religions, politics as well as economic system. The art of this period, including drama and theatre, started to reflect this new order. One of the by-products of this “new birth” was realism and naturalism.

In general, the works of such writers as Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekov, August Stringberg illustrate the main tenets of realism. Their main thrust was that dramatists must set down their observations impartially and objectively. Realists were, therefore, concerned with the faithful representation of life, which they perceive frequently lacks form. The realists tended to concentrate on middle-class life and preoccupations, avoiding larger more dramatic issues, except where such issues complicate character development. The realists wrote and produced plays in which the characters spoke, dressed and behaved like people did in real life as opposed to those of the symbolic or romantic realism, especially scientific realism, highlighted empirical verifiability: what you touch is what you feel. It was based on the concept of verisimilitude; fidelity to truthful depiction of middle class life on stage. Therefore, the main thrust of realism and naturalism is the depiction of truth; the quest for truth, wherein they limited their work to only verifiable contemporary subjects rather than myth or history as was the case in classical, medieval and neoclassical eras. It was from this movement that naturalism, which could be seen as an adjunct of realism, sprang, up, deprecating realism as being too restrictive.

Naturalism was a literary and dramatic movement that reigned, particularly, from the 1880s to 1940s. Naturalistic writers were influenced by the evolution theory of Charles Darwin. Darwin’s theory of natural selection, among others, sees heredity and environment, as factors that determine the survival and development of species. Thus naturalists hinged their philosophy on two basic elements – nature and nurture. While the former refers to heredity, the latter refers to environmental elements conducive for personal survival. The naturalists, therefore, believed that one’s heredity and social environment determine his character. Herein lies a major dichotomy between naturalism and its predecessor, realism; whereas realism; seeks only to describe subjects as they really are, naturalism attempted ‘scientifically,’ the more underlying forces (e.g. the environment or heredity) influencing the actions of its subjects, warts and all; rather undiluted realism.

Naturalistic works often include sordid subject matter, which were viewed as very raw and not palatable for audiences or public taste; poverty, racism, sex, prejudice, disease, prostitution, and filth. As a result, naturalistic



writers were frequently criticized for being too blunt. Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* and August Strindberg's *The Father* are typical depictions of the sordidness of realism and naturalism. In the *Ghosts*, Ibsen tells the story of the Alving family, destroyed by unfaithfulness, adultery, lies, lust and disease. Mr. Alving, a captain impregnated his maid, but this act is covered up even by his estranged wife, who herself had lust for the Pastor, Manders. To cover up, the act, Regina grows to become a woman to be lust after by Oswald, her unknowing half brother. Later, when the whole truth is unfolded, Oswald complains of a disease, siphylis which is believed to be inherited. The disease consumed him to a point where he becomes blind. He pleaded with the mother to help him with some pills which will make him die peacefully. As the play ends, Mrs. Alving is contemplating on whether to help her son to actually take his own life. The theories or philosophies of the realists and naturalist triggered other radical theories, which culminate in what has been termed the *modern temper* in dramatic literature.

Again, the theatre flows with the tide of time; therefore prevailing environmental conditions triggered the *modern temper* with very diverse movements; some radical, others extreme movements with their own divergent theories about life; and consequently; theatre and drama. In this group belongs the Expressionists, the Surrealists, the Dadaists, the Absurdist, the "Brechtians". These mixed bags which constitute antillusionistic modernism, as well as those which came after them, either to oppose or modify their theories and criticisms i.e. the postmodernists, gave different theories and criticisms on drama and theatre, as summarized. Suffice it, however, to say that their varied and radical views about the theatre is not far from the fact that they saw life as a mixed bag of contradictions – romance, wars, famine, hunger (even in the mist of plenty), hurricanes, slavery, man's inhumanity to man, corruption, religious hypocrisy, broken homes, armed banditry, diseases, terrorism, etc. All these contradictions reflected in drama and theatre in varied dimensions in forms of modern avant-gardism.

The absurdist, for instance, saw the world as meaningless, insane and therefore absurd. According to G. G. Darah, among all creatures ever created by God, only man kills his kind the most. Man is the most destructive agent on earth, and has killed his fellow man more than the entire natural disasters put together can do. The Crusades, the World War I and World War II, as well as other man's inhumanities to man are influences on absurd theory. In World War II (1939-1945), for instance, a single atomic bomb in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, killed an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 people out of a small community with a population of just about 343,698; and just three days later, another 40,000 were killed in another atomic bomb in Nagasaki (*Microsoft Encarta 2009*). When the absurdist reflected on this beastly side of man, this confusing, hostile, and indifferent world they lived, they came out with the absurd theory; a theory which manifested itself in the theatre in illogicality, unconventional dialogue, and minimal plots to express the apparent absurdity of human existence.

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Among the greatest theoreticians, critics, cum playwrights of the absurdist are the Irish-born playwright, Samuel Beckett and French playwrights Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. In his play, *Waiting for Godot*, (1954), Beckett portrays two tramps, Vladimir and Estagon waiting for a character named Godot. They are not sure who Godot is but they spend each day waiting for him and trying to understand the world in which they live. Thus, pessimism and illogicality became the hallmark of absurdism. This illogicality reflected also in the plot structure of the plays, which also reflected the disjointed and illogical behaviour of man. The illogicality also reflected in the theatre in rather unconventional lighting and set design; all to express the confusion in man and illogicality of human reasoning.

Among the outcome of the modern temper, is the work of Bertolt Brecht, (1898-1956), the most influential German dramatist and theoretician of the theater in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who also contributed to the development of the theatre through not only his plays, but his Epic theatre theory. Brecht saw the theatre as being too docile. He took Karl Marx philosophy of life, and denounced capitalism. Brecht saw man as an isolated and helpless creature in a society intrigued by political and moral laxities. This, like the absurdist, was not unconnected with the horror of war and the Nazi mayhem he had witnessed. He believed the theatre could be used to agitate people into taking decisions that would provoke positive change in society. He criticized the prevailing theatre, which he queried, forced the audience to be passive, and consequently could not provoke them to action.

Brecht's model theatre which he tagged "epic," therefore, went against the prevailing realistic and naturalistic theatre conventions of his time. Brockett notes:

According to Brecht, (in the prevailing theatre) events are presented as fixed and unchangeable, since even historical subjects are treated in present terms; this approach encourages the audience to believe that things have always been the same. Realistic staging gives the action an air of stability which contributes to the idea that society is solidly entrenched and cannot be altered. The spectator can, therefore, only watch in a hypnotized and uncritical way; his sense are lulled, and he cannot participate "productively" in the theatrical event (311).

And to make the audience participate productively, therefore, Brecht devised means of involving the audience during productions. His ultimate intention was to arouse the audience and stir up feelings that could engender desirable social reforms in the society. Thus, Brockett sees of Brecht's theatre as a "Theatre of Social Action".

Among the devices Brecht used to involve his audience are what he termed alienation effect, "historification" and epic. Through alienation effect, Brecht strove to "distant" the audience from the action. Distancing the audience here does not presuppose that the audience should not be emotionally involved (for the audience needs a level of emotional

involvement to comprehend the action); rather, he should, at the same time, place the action in a psychic distance to enable him critically evaluate the occurrence. The essence of alienation is emphasized by Fanon, in Umukoro (27) where he noted that:

When alienation becomes conscious, it provokes anger, aggressiveness, hostility, frustration and fear. Self-conscious alienation can also lead to critical reflection on reality and thereafter to action.

During performance, Brecht interrupted the action with songs, slides, and sometimes announcing the contents of each scene through posters. Ultimately, the audience is led to realize that what he is watching on stage is not real, but a comment about life which he is expected to critically appraise and contribute to. Brecht contributed greatly to dramatic literature with rich array of dramatic texts which include *The Three Penny Opera*, *Galileo*, and *Mother Courage and Her Children*. The latter play is an anti-war play which reveals an indomitable mother figure that misguidedly seeks to profit from war but loses her children instead.

Brecht's theory cannot be distant from the theatre, even of today, for as Mews put it, "no serious director can ignore Brecht, and his plays continue to be produced all over the world". Thus in directing and playwrighting, Brecht has a lot of apostles. Our own Femi Osofisan could be regarded as one of the greatest students of Brecht. Osofisan's approach of making actors put on their costumes at the glare of the audience, his open-ended approach to ending his plays such as *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, and *Once Upon Four Robbers*, are all Brechtian style, through and through.

#### **Dramatic Theory and Criticism: African Perspective**

The theories and criticisms discussed above all emanated from the Western dramatic shores. The lack of similar well defined and accepted theories on African drama and theatre like those of Aristotle has led to the varied conceptions and misconceptions on the nature of African dramatic and theatre, perse. The West had no option than to look at them from strictly Aristotelian-Eurocentric binoculars. The result is therefore that Africa has no African drama and theatre or that Africa has no tragedy of its own. The reason for their opinion is quite obvious; what the whites saw in Africa, as drama and theatre was a far cry from theirs, based on Aristotelian concept. This is why Anigala's assertion that "Aristotle's *Poetics* dealt a death blow on African Drama", can be both thought-provoking and controversial.

Although over the years, seasoned literary and dramatic luminaries such as Leopard Senghor, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, etc had attempted, in several treaties, to draw a road map wherewith African dramatic horizon could be located, there is yet to be a distinctive or standard theory for articulating real African drama and theatre. More worrisome is the

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fact that the various approaches of these African theorists into evolving distinctive critical paradigms for the appreciation of African dramatic order per se are anchored on a pattern of dichotomous pedestal in which criticism or comparison of Eurocentric conception of drama can be said to be the springboard. Thus, these icons evidently placed Aristotelian dramatic constitution, by their side, which they refuted, concurred with or outrightly rejected in varying degrees; all in attempts at wriggling or wrestling African dramatic order from the shrine of African Religion, in which western critics had imprisoned it. The point, herein, articulated is that African critics or theorists need not place Aristotle's conception of drama by their side to refute; rather, they ought to have looked at the nature of African drama, and fashion whatever theory or criticism is more cogent, oblivious of the western views.

Thus, African writers and literary critics have till date, been attempting to fashion how to reconstruct the horoscope of viewing African literary and dramatic literature in order to rescue them from the vault of primitivism, occultism or ritualistic enclave into which eurocentricism seems to have shackled them. The thrust of this paper is not to join that discourse, but to evaluate the relevance of well defined theories and criticism on the development of drama. We shall briefly look at some of the postulated theories by Africans concerning African drama and theatre. These theorists shall for the sake of convenience, be briefly categorized into traditional, Neo Aristotelian, ritualistic and post modernist.

#### **Traditional Theorists**

Amongst the traditionalist theorists is Leopold Senghor (1906-2001). Senghor, a Senegalese president, poet, philosopher, and theoretician, having witnessed racial segregation came up with the theory or concept of Negritude. Senghor used the term *negritude* to refer to the distinctive culture shared, he believed, by Africans and all members of the Africans in Diaspora (Vaillant). His contribution to dramatic theory and criticism is his theory that rather than by mimesis (imitation), African art "participates". Senghor opined that the African sees his world as holistic, and therefore rather than "imitates", he "participates". He clarifies the above by viewing the African world vis-à-vis that of the West. To him, the African viewpoint is "trying to become one with what he sees"; while on the contrary, the European uses scientific method based on classifying, labeling, and critically dissectional. This is also the view articulated by Umukoro (2004). Rather than distinguish between various elements of drama as Aristotle did for instance, Senghor pointed out that the nature of African art is particularly collaborative, in such a way that music, costume, dance, songs, sculpture and other elements come together to form a whole; all in gestalt, as total theatre.

Similarly, the audience is involved in this holistic experience, not as observers, but as co-performers. In addition, he pointed out that art to the

Africans is committed in the sense that it takes into consideration, history, geography, religion, the yearning and aspiration of the people.

Although later criticized, there are some vital aspects of Senghor's theory which is common to those of other theorists of other dramatic schools of thought. This is the element of "participation" of "communalness" of African drama cum art.

### **Neo Aristotelian Theorists**

These are the African theorists and critics who concurred to, and use Aristotelian dramatic principles to assess African drama and theatre. This group belong two notable African poets, dramatists and critics, J. P. Clark – Bekederemo and Ola Rotimi. Clark, critic, poet and dramatist revealed that African dramatic literature could be viewed from Aristotelian dramatic horoscope. In his contribution titled "The Drama in African Ritual Display", Clark posits that:

If drama means the elegant imitation of some action significant to a people, if this means the physical representation or the evocation of one: poetic image or a complex of such images, if the vital element to such representation or evocation as speech, music, ritual, song as well as dance and mime, and if as the Japanese say of their Noh theatre, the aim is to "open the ear of the mind of the spectator in a corporate audience and open his eyes to the beauty of form," then there is drama in plenty in Nigeria (African) much of these as distinctive as may be in China, Japan and Europe.

However, although he sees drama as imitation, he introduced certain elements that are incongruous to the whole principles of imitation. These elements are participation and possession. We can clearly see this in his play *Song of a Goat*. In the play, Orukorere is always possessed, and each time she is in this state she is able to reveal future occurrences. The second element is participation; the community members in the play acting as chorus are always around, trying to find out the problems of the Zifa family. They participate not just as spectators, but as co-performers.

These two elements introduced by Clark, and also agreed to by other African theorists such as Uvyovbukerhi in his theory "Drama as Conjunction" are the off-shoot of the mix between traditional drama and the western drama introduced into African cosmology by the colonialists. Possession and participation are hitherto very common elements of African traditional festival drama. The mixture is a kind of hybridization; for, with the introduction of western dramatic/theatrical modes to Africa, traditional drama/theatre remained side by side to form a kind of hybridization as Brockett and Ball explain:

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When European took control of the most continent (of Africa) they brought their own ideas about theatre and tried to establish them there. The combination of the colonialist heritage and indigenous forms created a wide spectrum of performances in Africa (273).

Anigala is also of the above view. He reveals that:

Traditional festivals have contributed immensely to the development of contemporary African drama... (there are) similarity in terms of the explorative use of dramatic and theatrical elements inherent in traditional festival and contemporary African drama. This is because traditional festivals are believed to have influenced the forms, content and structure of the artistic products of contemporary African dramatists or artists (91).

*Song of a Goat*, is one of such hybridization, with a blend of Greek dramatic heritage and African dramatic aesthetics.

Rotimi (1981) also attempted to explain African drama from the Aristotelian mimetic perspective; he posited that:

The standard acceptance of the term "Drama", within a cultural setting, at any rate, implies "an imitation of an action ... or of a person or persons in action" ... Some African ritual ceremonies reveal instances of imitation either of an experience in life, or of the behaviour- patterns of some Power. Others merely re-present certain Powers without the mimetic impulse to recreate the ways and details of those powers. What could be, and has frequently been, mistaken for Drama in most African traditional displays, appear when this latter type of non-imitative ceremonies effervesces with movement, rhythm and spectacles beyond the ordinary ...

Rotimi did not end there, rather he puts it succinctly that "Ritual display that reveals in their style of presentation, in their purpose, and value, evidences of imitation, enlightenment and or entertainment can be said to be drama". Obviously put, for Rotimi, any ritual display *that does not reveal evidences of imitation* in its style of presentation, in its purpose, and value, whether it enlightens and or entertains cannot be said to be drama. This is a purely Aristotelian aristocracy, an attempt to force a Eurocentric concept of truth on the entire mankind.

However, Rotimi in attempting to imitate the Western dramatic tradition is not oblivious of the local cultural aesthetics of where he is from. This could vividly be seen in his treatment of *The Gods are not to Blame*, using Yoruba symbols and metaphors; flora and fauna etc.

### **Ritualistic Metaphors**

Belonging to this group is Wole Soyinka. Soyinka's most famous treatise on African dramatic literature is his "The Fourth Stage" in his *Myth Literature and the African World*, where he tried to locate Yoruba tragedy in the lair of ritual. According to him, drama is a ritualistic communion. Soyinka sees tragedy as belonging to:

the Mysteries of Ogun and choric ecstasy of revellers, ... Yoruba tragedy plunges straight into the 'chthonic realm', the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming ... Tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of his severance, the fragmentation of essence from self .... (140)

Uyovbuckerhi reveals that ritual is a very important concept in Soyinka's conception of drama and theatre, and that for Soyinka, ritual portends many things:

- i. It is the matrix of creativity.
- ii. It is the link between the theatre and the present.
- iii. It is the language of the masses; it is a universal idiom that is understood among cultural boundaries.
- iv. It is a great liberator or emancipator because it provides the audience the opportunity of acquiring a new self awareness through participation in the ritualistic communion.
- v. It enables us to cross the gulf of transition by acting as a bridge.

It is quite evident that Soyinka's theory is rather more relevant to the explanation of his works. Applying Soyinka's theory to the appreciation of other African drama could end in futility. However, it eases the understanding of his works, especially his *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *The Road* (1965), *The Strong Breed* (1963), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975).

#### **African Postmodernists Theorists**

This subdivision as earlier stated is only for convenience; some of the earlier discussed African playwrights may naturally also fall in this category. However, Femi Osofisan, one of African's most prolific writers is the special focus here. His approach to drama and theatre is Brechtian, and consequently Marxian. Like Brecht, Osofisan believes that the theatre should be able to rouse the people into social action. Rather than allowing his audience to be emotionally involved, he borrowed Brecht's method, wherewith actors, put on their costumes, in full views of the audience. His drama and theatre are communal in approach as they tend to involve the audience. In some of his plays like *Once Upon Four Robbers*, and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, Osofisan gives a double-ended ending, so that the audience is made to choose how the play should end. Moreover, music and dance and chants are

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reoccurring elements of Osofisan plays. In fact, Osofisan drama without music, chant and dance is like present day Nigeria without a Pentecostal church.

Moreover, as Iji (b) reveals, "Post-modernist sensibilities are overtly pessimistic, seeing the world as making no progress: seeing realism or reality as a myth pervading the society in which we live. For example, for the post-modernist, reality and love are myth". We can see this in Osofisan's works where man is pessimistically portrayed as loving frivolities at the expense of humanity; where greed and the love for wealth supersede the love for humanity; where everyday social problems are brought to the collective attention of all.

Many other African playwrights also fall within this group. Egyptian Tawfik el-Hakim's *The Fate of a Cockroach* (1966), also paints a pessimistic picture of the struggling man, whose struggle on earth at the end comes to naught. By and large, African drama and theatre have been one that is historically, culturally and regionally conditioned. Themes of colonialism in East Africa, apartheid in South Africa, religion in North Africa, corruption, and other social malice in West Africa, are mostly x-rayed. There is no doubt that a wealth of drama and theatrical literature has evolved since the colonial and post colonial Africa. What is yet lacking is that till date, there is yet to be any concrete standard African criteria wherewith African dramatic literature could be assessed. All critical directions appear, directly or indirectly, to copy-cat those of the mostly Western dramaturgical cosmology and weltanschauung, as exemplified even by Soyinka's *The Fourth Stage...* outstandingly, among others.

### CONCLUSION

It is important to state, here, that it is not a surprise that Africa is yet to fathom clear-cut and distinctive dramatic theories because of the diversity of themes that African drama transverses. Moreover, in postmodernist era, which lacks clear-cut definition, no single theory would suffice for the explanation of all the dramas that have emanated or are emanating from the continent and the world over. Also, since drama flows with the tide of time; today's theory may, in fact, be irrelevant tomorrow, as we discovered in earlier part of this paper; or may attain a different shift paradigmatically.

It is important to conclude that without the various criticisms and theories that have come down to us from Plato till date, drama would have been very monolithic, colourless and probably boring. In other words, we owe the array of the different dramatic traditions, in form and content, from classical; medieval, renaissance, neoclassical, the absurdist, expressionistic, epic, and post modern to the ritualistic, protest, and social African drama; to the different dramatic theories and criticism over the ages. Dramatic theories and criticisms are the blood, veins and sinews of sustainable drama and theatre.



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