International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research 7(2):27-34, April-June, 2019

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African Drama As A Tool For Societal Rebirth: A Study Of Ngugi Wa Thiong'O'S: *The Black Hermit*

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ABSTRACT
We live in a society where things seem no longer in shape. Moral decadence, power drunkenness, religious conflict, tribalism, kidnapping, etc are almost the expectations of the citizenry at every dawn of the day. Individuals, groups and even governments at the local, state and federal levels have in one way or the other, proffered solutions to these problems. Yet, crime, oppression, disrespect, distrust, ritual killing, etc are still on the rise. The questions bothering the mind are these: Why are these problems still lingering in the society? Are the problems insurmountable? Are we living in a cursed society? Why are things no longer working well? Which other unpopular methods could be introduced to ameliorate the situation? It is in a bid to suggesting answers to these questions this study intends to present drama as a tool for checking societal vices particularly in Africa. Specifically, the thematic preoccupations would be examined to see if, by presenting and watching such plays, lessons that will help us check our excesses in the society would be learnt. Dramatic techniques used by the authors are not going to be explored. The study concludes that drama can help: i. To checkmate excesses of leaders; ii. Instill respect in the young generation; iii. Bring back the dignity of man; iv. Live in harmony with one another, etc. the study recommends among others that: i. the teaching of drama should be encouraged in schools; iii. Dramatic clubs should be formed in every secondary and primary school in the country; iii. There should be a drama/entertainment progrmme which should serve the purpose of entertaining in the Senate, House of Representative and the State Houses of Assembly. And such plays should capture themes of national interest.
Keywords: Drama, Society, Entertainment, Rebirth, Alternative

INTRODUCTION

Drama, as it were, is a much more captivating subject which seems very close to the heart on any person who appreciates theatrical works and who does not perceive the worth or quality of a play as purely a literary composition but sees it as an instrument through which administrative excesses are checked, etc. Among the genres of literature, drama appeals more to the heart than the others. Whether in its comic, tragic, tragic-comic, etc forms it brings the minds of the peoplse closer to the happenings in the society than the other genres. Hence, in studying drama or while watching a play either in its recorded form or in "real action", interest should not be placed solely on its academic importance alone but also on its potency to bring about reformation to the society.

Drama offers a variety of rich experience of theatre, which is deeply rooted in a living society; spiritually and culturally unified, despite the diversity in cultural differences in the African nations.

What is drama?

Drama is a literary work written to be performed /acted by actors on a stage before an audience Aristotle, pointed out that drama is given to works because they represent 'men doing things'. Etymologically, drama is a derivation from a Greek word 'dram', which when translated means 'to do' or 'to act'. 'To act' implies that drama in its nature brings excitement. No wonder most people are always attracted and excited at others 'doings' and 'actions'. By definition, drama also referred to as 'a play.

From the forgoing, it could be deduced that 'Drama" is the vocal aspect of a literary work that is meant for performance and entertain of a given audience. In other words, drama is a literary piece (text) that is translated by artists into stage language via dialogue, music, songs, mime, gestures, dance, spectacles, etc. In its real sense, drama could be considered as a kind of theoretical performance in which the active participants impersonate, via a pre-determined sequence of physical actions, create a story for the purpose of entertainment, education, information, etc of a given audience.

The most outstanding feature of drama is 'imitation of life' which implies realism. By realism in the context of this study, we mean the representation of characters, actions and physical objects on state in a strikingly life-like manner.

When we watch a play, we observe that the dramatist of playwright does everything to make his characters behave as if they were the real people. This convention makes it clearer that. Drama can bring to public domain, important and serious issues, in a much more entertaining manner, in any given society. Hence, drama can bring about positive change in the society. With the actions in a play, individual's orientation which was hitherto negative could be made positive. It can force a man to see himself as he is, thereby making him to be conscious of the potentials imbedded in him. With this consciousness, man can influence his society at large to bring about positive reformation.

Jenry Grotoweski in his ***Toward a Poor Theatre,*** opined that:

> *'The activity that goes between the audience and the actor, involves the sharing of experience for the purpose of communion. This experience being shared by the audience and the actor is presented in form of an image which combines in diverse ways to create a kind of super-image in the corporate mind of the audience. With the emotion created, drama can influence human behavior for any purpose.*

A Brief History of African Literature

Traditionally**,** African literature/drama was birthed and conditioned sociologically by the colonial milieu. The experiences of colonialism which were reenacted in the write-ups of the early African elites set the train of African literature ablaze. Though its real origin could be traced to the experiences of slavery and slave trade, it was colonialism that completed the total alienation of Africans.

Specifically, it was the proclamation of "negritude" that gave birth to African literature of which drama is a part. The rationale behind the proclamation was that European literature on the colonial theme was a classic case of art committed to the service of imperialism.

It should be recalled that African countries passed through several stages of development and transformation. Before the white proletariats arrived in Africa, Africans were having their own civilization. But with the entrance of the whites into Africa, a new kind of administration emerged which was parallel to that of the Africans.

The initial stage of the African contact with the whites was very cordial. There was mutual exchange of African raw materials for white manufactured goods. It was this trade that metamorphosed into slavery and slave trade. With the end of slave trade in the 18th century, African countries graduated into another stage, "colonialism". After this stage was the era of nationalism and nationalist struggles. Africans who were privileged to school abroad in the early

19th century in conjunction with some African heroes who fought during the First World War, agitated for self government in Africa. It was at this point that many African writers began to write and condemn the actions of the colonial masters and everything that represents "the white" that was imposed on Africans. This consciousness later propelled these early writers especially the playwrights to start writing on such themes that portray the conditions, values and aspirations of the black race.

Thematic Preoccupation of African Drama

Literature is like a mirror, which can reflect the happenings in the society. Hence, African literature is borne out of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial experiences. In other words, an artist is influenced by the things that experienced around him, be it imagined or real. To this end, African literature focuses on subject matters that are relevant to the African society as it relates to their experiences, values and aspirations.

Themes of black origin include: revolution, generational conflict, corruption, racism, feminism, neocolonialism, etc. Notwithstanding all these themes, "Negritude" remained the most outstanding theme of African origin. Among the Apostles of the Negritude movement are: Léopold Sédar Senghor (known as the father of negritude), Aimé Césaire, Léon Gontran Damas and others.

Relationship between Drama and the Society

From the onset, African literature, and in our case, African drama could not but be 'reactional'. It was literature using the 'weapon of words' and 'actions' for the legitimate defence of the African heritage. Hence, the relationship between African drama and the African society is that of correspondence. This is because art is created on the basis of continual everyday cultural/ideological interrelationship between a class and its artist. To this end, in talking about 'drama' and 'society', we are referring to those plays that convey real life in typical situations, with plots that seem credible or probable with regards to everyday life, and the circles and passages of life. Fela Onikulapo-Ramson Kuti, describes the relationship between literature and the society in the following words:

> I am an artist. I have my reasons of being sad. I want to change sadness. I want people to be happy. And I can do it by playing music. And through happy music. I tell them about the madness of others. So, that they will come to realize that "oh, we can be happy". With my music I create change. I see it. So really, am using my music as a weapon. I play music as a weapon. The music is not coming from me as subconscious thing. It's conscious.

The above points of Fela have really pointed out the relationship between creativity and the society. Fela's conscious music has enriched the society through his criticism to societal vices and cultural invasion, class polarization and class struggles. So, art, of which drama is a part, imitate real life situations, thereby effecting positive and desirable change and reformation.

Analysis of Ngugi Wa Thiong'O's *The Black Hermit*

The Black Hermit was the first of several plays written by the author.

The Playwright

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, with his original name as **James Thiong'o Ngugi**, was born in January 5, 1938, in Limuru, Kenya of the East Africa. He was the leading novelist in his country. His first *Weep Not, Child* (1964) was the first major novel written in English by an East African. He adopted his traditional name and wrote in the Bantu language of Kenya's Kikuyu people.

Ngugi obtained his bachelor's degrees from Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, in year 1963 and from Leeds University, Yorkshire, England, in 1964. Immediately after his studies he served as a lecturer in English at University College, Nairobi, Kenya, and later as a visiting professor of English to Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, U.S. between 1972 to 1977. Among his works we have: *Weep Not, Child*, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *The River Between* (1965), *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (19760,) etc.

The Play: *The Black Hermit*

The Black Hermit was first produced by the Makerere College students'dramatic society at Uganda national theatre in November 1962 when the East African countries attained independence. One of the major challenges they were having was tribalism. Hence, Ngugi used this play point out that people were against those embarrassment hence they had to picture and root out the negative effects of tribalism, racism and religious functions

The Plot

The Black Hermit (first published in 1968; premiered in 1962) has only gained attention in terms of Ngugi's initial struggle to formulate a specific mode of resistance to neocolonialism or the arrested independence in Africa in general, and Kenya in particular () The story started in Nyobi's hut, where she was discussing with her daughter-in-law, Thoni, who had not allowed the pains of life to go off her mind as a result of her predicaments. Thoni was a widow who was compelled by tradition to marry her late husband's brother, Remi, also left her and disappeared without a trace.

In a bid to consoling Thoni, Nyobi her mother-in-law, in a soliloquy tries to imagine why children have chosen to disrespect their elders, unlike the good old days 'when sons still gave respect to parents'. Worried by the prevailing predicaments of her daughter-in-law, she suggested that Thoni shoud, "Go and get another husband'. However, Thoni protested the proposal and rather wished that instead of going from hand to hand, she will prefer to 'die and have the grave for a bed'.

A sudden thought came to Nyobi, when she remembered that Remi was once a God fearing child and she decided to call the Pastor to persuade him to go fetch Remi from the city. At this juncture, an elder of the community came in, and like Remi's mother, he was on the same mission to bring back remi from the city, but with a different plan. He and other elders have met and had consulted the diviner who gave them a talisman 'black magic, which they believe is potent enough to bring Remi back to the village and his wife. The elder was sent to Remi's mother Nyobi just to sick her blessing to make the medicine effective. Nyobi, though a devote Christian, betrayed her faith and poured her blessings on the native power.

Nyobi:

"With all my heart,
Go in peace, and success attend you"(9)

Immediately the elder left, Nyobi remembered that what she did was bad. She lamented thus:

Nyobi:

"What have I done?
I know Christo hates our medicine,
Suppose God punished me
So that Remi does not come back?"(9)

In the last scene of the Act, she met with the pastor and pleaded with him to go to the city to fetch her son for her. The pastor agreed to go, but asked her go back home and bring up the child-Thoni.

The next Act was in Remi's city home where he was seen chatting with his friends, Jane-his girlfriend and Omange. The second scene of this Act is where most of the themes are drawn from. Remi and his friend Omange where discussing on issues bothering on racism and tribalism, which was an aftermath effect of independence. It was here that Remi explain how he has been trapped by tradition. He stated that the while he was still the village, Marua people, his home town, used to look up upon him for everything. They respected and obeyed him in everything. He narrated how he had asked them to join the Africanist Party. But now, the same people who had taken him as their leader, being the first to attend a university, have returned to him, as if to compel him to reciprocate for their love, respect and reverence for him. And now he is compelled by tradition to marry his late brother's wife, which is against modern civilization and his Christian faith.

While he was narrating the story to his friend Omange, the elders from his village entered and he has to ask his friend to go. Remi was taken aback at the visit and asked them why they came.

1st Ender: Our tribe wails under the new government.
2nd Elder: No son of our soil is a D. O.
3rd Elder: Not one of our skin and blood is in the new government.

At the end, they told him that he was the only person from Marua tribe that can salvage them from troubles. After much conviction, they dropped the black medicine at the entrance of his home and left. Immediately they left, the Pastor also came in, and as usual with his ecclesiastic talks, tries to convince Remi to return to the village. But unlike the elders, the pastor wanted him to return to meet his mother who '…daily grows weak'; and to lead other children of God to the cross, that is, to become a priest. The pastor, like the elders too, left a Bible behind.

Remi in a confused state, declared:

I have been too long a hermit
In the city, I'd thought I'd escape
From things that were me.
That were part of my life.
I must now rise and go to the country.
For I must serve our people.
Save them from traditions and bad customs.
Free them from tribal menacles.
Now. (Act II, scene II, pg45)

At this point, Remi took both the black medicine and the Bible and weighed them. The significance of the weighing is to tell which of them carries weight in his (Remi's) life. While the Bible represents Christianity, the black medicine represents traditional belief. He concludes:

'These are part of me.
Part of my life.
My whole life!"

It implies here that Remi was neither committed Christian nor an ardent pagan.

Remi must have to convince his city girl-friend that he must return home. He tries to convince her that he has a clarion call from his tribe, and must return to his country to meet his people. Both Remi and Jane had a protracted argument on the issue. Though Jane insisted going with, but he was able to convince her by telling her that he was already married. It was at this point she allowed him to go alone.

Back at the village in Act II, the whole village a festive atmosphere had enveloped the whole village. There were celebrations everywhere as a result of Remi's return, though for different reasons. To the pastor, the return of the Black Hermit is to give him relief. His expectation is that, as the only university graduate from the Marua tribe, Remi will help him to teach "Sunday School' class. To the elders, Remi has come back to Marua to restore their lost hopes and bring about a government of the tribe.

As the saying goes that, 'you cannot count your eggs before they are hatched', contrary to the expectations of the people of the Marua tribe, Remi has returned to fight tradition and custom rather than the political freedom that the elders expect or the commitment and devotion that the pastor expects.

Remi disappointed everyone. Rather than asking the people to join the Africanist party, he has returned to support the nationalist party. He further fought against tradition represented by his mother for compelling him to marry a woman he does not love, and '…whose loyalty will ever lie with those in the gave…'.

At this juncture, Thoni, who has been expecting her husband-Remi to come back and warm her bed; ask her for meal in the evening; make her wash his cloths; give her a child; make her feel a new life, has got all her hope chattered, and is now forced to stay on earth.

Thoni:

To be like an unwanted maize plant
That has been pulled out and fling on the bare apth.
To be trodden beneath men's fee.
And left to wither and dry up in the sun. (Act III, Scene II)

She ran away to obey nature's call, for she must go 'for darkness calls'.

Remi, as if waking up from slumber, go in search of Thoni, but it was too late. Thoni is gone! She has committed suicide!

Like a man that was suddenly woken from sleep, Remi just realized the true love Thoni had for him when he saw a letter she dropped for him. After studying the farewell letter, he wrote:

I wish you had sent the letter earlier
But I never gave you a chance
Nor even tried to understand you
I came to break Tribe and Custom,
Instead, I've broken you and me.

Would Remi have married Thoni if he had received the letter earlier even after all his protest about the custom and tradition of the Marua people. This is a million dollar question!

Themes in the Black Hermi

i. Generational Conflict

The major theme in this play is that of generational conflict between the young and the older generations. The younger generation is represented by Remi, while the older generation is represented by Ngume. The younger generation was against the custom and tradition which they see as being to obnoxious.

The younger generation does not succumb to the old custom or practice of a younger one being compelled to marry a late brother's wife, not considering whether she loves him or not. Represented by Remi, the younger generation finds this practice as being obsolete and barbaric, and tries to make efforts to change it.

One of the ways the younger generation feels could stop such an act is to protest, which Remi exemplified in the play by running to the city, to live as a hermit. The younger generation (Remi) believes that it is uncivilized for an educated young man of his caliber to be involved in a marriage with his late brothers wife, especially when it is forced on him. Hence he protested:

Can't you see? I had already reconciled myself to the
Fact that she was my brother's wife. And she was.
How then could I take another man's wife? – I
Wanted a woman of my own. But if I married this
Girl, how could I ever get it out of my head that she
belonged to another? Could I see her as my wife?
No. It is not that I am very religious. Even today, I
Could run away with your wife if I know she loved
Me.

To the younger generation, marriage was more than getting a life partner. It has to do with true and sincere love. To him, the woman was another's wife and any attempt made to marry her will mean, 'taking a risk' of one's marital life and exposing oneself to social embarrassment. To the younger generation, 'marriage is a life-time investment', and must be entered into with caution, with the couple reciprocating love. Hence Remi declared:

I know she did not love me. Or she would
Not have married my brother. How could I go
To her and say: Thoni, I love you, I have always
Loved you. Even if….. I would have known
That she had turned to me to fulfill the emptiness in
her heart to sooth her grief for her true husband.
Would you like to feel that a woman was using
You because she couldn't have the man she really
Wanted?

ii. Tribal/Racial Discrimination

Another prominent theme in the play is that of tribalism and racism. Ngugi used his play to expose and attack the trend of tribal /racial politics prevailing in the African polity. It was expected that since Africa, is no longer under colonialism their conditions of living will improve. Sadly enough, independence brought more troubles to Africa than blessings. We have the case of South Africa, were the real blacks were neglected to mere labourers with meager earnings. This was capture in Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Death*, where one of his characters Sizwe Bansi had to die and live in the ghost of "Robert Zwelinzima", just to make ends meet. He conclude thus:
So Nowetu, for the time being my troubles are over.
So, Ngugi used his, *The Black Hermit* to expose and attack the cankerworm called "tribalism/racism.
It should be noted here that African leaders who succeeded the colonial masters were using the opportunity they had as leaders to favour only those who speak the same language with them and who were tribal loyalists to them. Ngugi attributed the course of all these to certain obnoxious practices to the high level of illiteracy. "otherwise, they will revert to tribalism and religion as a cure for their ills.'
This is also true about the present day Nigeria. Often times we see leaders do things only to favour the regions, tribes, etc.

iii. **Religious Tolerance**

One of the problems of African countries today is religion and religious crises. We can see from the play that while, every other person involved in luring Remi back to the village was doing it for the benefit of all, the pastor who represented western religion, was interested in bringing back Remi to .to the Marua tribe to lead them to Christ, which he felt was the primary reason why, god elevated him (Remi) to this level of 'being the only Marua person to go to the university. Hence, when Nyobi asked: 'Will he really come today", he said:

Doubt not. But be proud
He must be kept from politics
Away from the influences of tribal leaders.

By way of proffering solution to the religious intolerance, Ngugi through the character of Remi, stated thus:

Even you, pastor. You and other Christians must not live isolated. We must
Link hands; build a house in which you and I and all our people can live in
Peace, cultivating the riches of the heart.

iv. Unity and Reconciliation

When Remi had returned to the tribe, he found out that the only thing to unite the tribe with was to abandon the Africanist Party, which was a symbol of disunity and join the Nationalist Party which represents oneness. Hen he said:

But the state must head the way. The Africanist Party must first give back the settlers' land to the people.

Other themes in the play include oppression,

The Role of Drama in the Society

The role drama pays in the society is enormous. Aside its traditional functions of entertainment, education, information, etc, "Drama and theatre can be used in a variety of ways to support personal development." Bayliss & Dodwell (2010). Drama can contribute to the reorientation of Africans towards an egalitarian and vice free society. Specifically, drama can: i. help to checkmate excesses of leaders; ii. instill respect in the younger generation; iii. bring back the dignity of man; iv. help man to live in peace and harmony with other, etc.

CONCLUSION

Societal malaise can be checked using drama and literature as a tool. This study was intended to see how drama, as one of the genres literature can be used to bring about change in the society. Ngugi in his *The Black Hermit* has been able to expose some of the ills in the society today. We saw that the return of Remi to the Marua tribe brought about change, transformation to the society. The death of Thoni is symbolic in this play. Thoni was an embodiment of the pains of African tradition. Her death means the death of obnoxious customs and tradition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends among others that"

i. The teaching of drama should be encouraged in schools;

ii. Dramatic clubs should be formed in every secondary and primary school in the country;

iii. There should be a drama/entertainment progrmme which should serve the purpose of entertaining in the Senate, House of Representative and the State Houses of Assembly. And such plays should capture themes of national interest. By so doing, while they are getting entertained, their will get refreshed from an hitherto much boring and may turbulent session and of course, they will also receive some lessons.

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