

Innovations

African Aesthetics in the Drama of Olu Obafemi

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Abstract: *This paper discuss extensively on Obafemi who remains one of the vibrant and prolific playwrights in Nigeria whose plays have constantly been dedicated towards exploring topical themes and subject matters affecting the masses particular in Nigeria and generally in Africa. Indeed, the main themes and tendencies of Obafemi's plays cut across several topical issues which reflect the social realities of the Nigeria and African people. Consequently, among other Nigerian playwrights in his generation, Obafemi's plays undoubtedly possess rich element of African aesthetics within the polemics of modern drama. Therefore, this study examines the plays of Obafemi with the few to discuss African aesthetics as crucial elements in his plays in this paper, attempt is made to examine the introductory aspects of the paper which are found in the subsequent sub-headings.*

Keywords: *African aesthetics, Drama, Modern drama, Playwrights, Festivals and Ceremonies*

Introduction

Olufemi Obafemi was born in 1950. He is one of the literary giants in Nigeria and Africa. He had his Primary and Secondary Education in Kogi State. He obtained his first degree at Ahmadu Bello University in 1975, Master's Degree at the University of Sheffield in 1978 and Ph.D. at the University of Leeds in 1981 (Ododo 23). He began his academic career as Graduate Assistant and as one of the few lecturers of the University of Ilorin in 1976 and rose the ranks to become a professor in 1990. His rather speedy academic career was a product of compulsive industry, focused research and versatility in his inimitable commitment to academia and his traditional expectation of teaching, research and publication. Little Wonder Obafemi has been described by several scholars as "a prolific and an enigmatic writer" (Olokodana-James 102).

As a lecturer, Professor Olufemi Obafemi has successfully supervised over 60 undergraduate Masters and Ph.D. students, some of whom have become professors today. Many of his students are today well distinguished in their own areas of calling. Professor Obafemi is a vibrant and dedicated scholar who has authored and co-authored over fifteen scholarly books, sixteen creative books (Plays, poetry and a novel) and over seventy journal article in national and international outlets (Ododo 27). Some of Obafemi's critical books include: Contemporary Nigerian Theatre; Public Discourse; Culture, Language and Literature; Ideology and Stage-craft in Nigeria and so on (Osundare, 43).

Similarly, some of his creative works are wheels (Novels); Illuminations; Songs of Hope (Poetry); Naira Has No Gender; Dark Times Are Over?; Nights of a Mystical Beast; Pestle of the Mortar; Ogidi Mandate; Suicide Syndrome; The New Dawn; Scapegoats and Sacred Cows; Running Dreams; Twirls of Adiitu and Iyunade; and Near and Distance cries (Plays). It is worthy of note that Obafemi's play, Ogidi Mandate, won the 2011 ANA/J.P Clark prize for Drama while his poetry, Illuminations got an honorable mention for the ANA/Okara prize for 2010. As a scholar and through-bred academic, Obafemi initiated and experimental tool and theory of analysis for revolutionary aesthetics in Africa exemplifying the plays of second generation Nigerian and African dramatists. This fact is underscored by Oni and Ododo who also submit that Obafemi has also been able to fashion a dialectical-materialist theoretical cannon that has influenced the interpretation of radical drama among theatre scholars in West Africa in the eighties and nineties (15).

Obafemi was, and still is, a teacher and mentor to many. He is a dedicated, hard working academic and administrator. His zeal and commitment to learning, teaching and other administrative roles have earned him national and international recognition. He an academic per excellence. All these and more which cannot be included here for the purpose of time earned him the Nigeria National Order of Merit, an award given him this year by the federal Government of Nigeria. It is worthy of note that he was the sole recipient for his award; no other Nigeria, hither I Medicine, Engineering or the Sciences which are the other fields of interests, qualified for it (Ododo 29). Obafemi his sound academic profit literary and theatre scholar, versatile public intellectual, critical thinker, essayist, accomplished play write, stage director, poet, novelist, translator, inimitable teacher, humanist and an resistible bundle of talent, in deed, his works have "repositioned the country (Nigeria) through timely interventions committed in writings" (Olokodana-James 102).

Philosophy of Aesthetics

Prior to the 1700s, discourses on the concept of aesthetics were often initiated within the nexus of the relationship existing between architecture and music. Although these two filed celebrate the context and essence of beauty, they significantly belong to different arts in terms of structure and praxis. This is because,

architecture is an art that can be appreciated by all because it draws appreciation after physical construction while music, on the other hand is an art that appeals through harmony and rhythm. Thus, Joseph Addison's widely celebrated book titled, *The pleasures of Imagination* which was published in 1712, was believed to have initiated the discourse on the principles of aesthetics as an area of philosophy (*The Spectators*, 14).

Aesthetics according to Harold is a branch of philosophy which interrogates the nature of art and beauty in relation to the character of our experience of the two phenomena (7). Drawing from the above definition from Harold, it is evident that aesthetics, as the study of the beauty in arts on nature, is a broad area of study, and the theories and perspectives surrounding it span the history of western philosophy beginning from ancient Greece to our current dispensation. In aesthetics, judgments are made about beauty which could be an Ideal, or value such as goodness, truth or wellness. Hence, Aesthetics a similar way ethics, is a largely normative pursuit. The reason for this is because, in conceding the nature beauty, aesthetics shares and area of intersections with metaphysics and questions asked about how we know and recognize beauty are often epistemological. This fact is corroborated by Germaine Geer who postulates that, "every woman knows that, regardless of all other of achievement, she is a failure if she is not beautiful" (23).

In light of the above, Grube argues that the search for the philosophical approach, essence and significance of the beauty and the beautiful is traceable to ancient Diana of the Greeks. Furthermore, Grude cited in Abasi Ibanga also observes that for the Greeks, the word, "beautiful" is often used to refer to physical attractiveness which represents an anthropocentric point of view i.e. a view that regards humans as the central factor (249). However, the concept of beauty did not attract the attentions of western philosophy until the arrival of Plato, who himself probably inherited philosophical discourse from Socrates. In most of his writings, Plato discuss beauty or the beautiful in relation to the sublime or the ideal as well as a harmonious comparison of metaphysical elements. This is validated by Crispin Sartwell who submits that Plato, in most of his writings, often seeks to link beauty to the response of desire, love or passion, even though he discusses beauty within the orbit of form i.e. an abstract ideal or a type of quality that is transcendent to time and space), and he identifies the beauty of particular objects in their participation in the form (44). Similarly, Nickolas Papas shares the same opinion with Crispin Sartwell by maintain that in the philosophical dome of Plato, "beauty possesses the reality that forms have and is discovered through the same dialectics that bring other forms to light" (1). Pappas also goes on to argue that the beautiful is that which is "noble" and "admirable", and that Plato's concept of beauty facilitates the discovery and rediscovery of the good because "beautiful things strike everyone and arouse everyone's curiosity's (1). Therefore, from the platonian point of view, it is evident that beauty with objective and that beauty exists insentiently of perfection.

Aristotle was another philosopher who perceived aesthetics through a philosophical view. However, Aristotle disagreed with Plato's submission on what beauty is as contained in his works. For Aristotle, the precepts of aesthetics hinge on the fact that the good and the beautiful are the beginning of knowledge and the movement of things. However, this is not to say that good and the beautiful are the same; but they have a common roots. This can only be contextualized in the light of Aristotle's theory which legislates proportionality and appropriateness for every right

an just action (16). Judging from the above-stated submissions, one can observe that Aristotle defines beauty in relation to appropriateness, symmetrical nature and proportionality by averring that, "the greatest species of the beautiful are order, symmetry, and the divinity" (315). In his reflection on Aristotle's opinion on the concept of aesthetics, John Marshall also submits that:

Beauty for Aristotle is comic which in its highest form is fixed and aternal; the highest beauty is to be found in the heavens.... For him, (Aristotle), the heavens do declare an eternal glory, and the earth is full of a resplendent beauty. (53)

Suffice it to say that Aristotle identifies beauty with nature, and sets nature as a standard for the beautiful. With the above discourses and counter-discourses on the concept of aesthetics by Plato and Aristotle, it is clear that the concept of beauty, for the early Greek philosophers, was used as a term to capture the objectivity and exactness of art and nature. Certainly, the views of these two early philosophers charted the cause for the emergence of subsequent theories and discourses on aesthetics.

Another notable philosopher whose works have significantly developed the modalities on the perspectives on aesthetics is Immanuel Kant. In his popular book titled, Critique of Aesthetic judgment, Kant cited in Ginsborg defines beauty thus; "in making a judgment of beauty about an object, one takes it that everyone else who perceives the object ought also to judge it to be beautiful, and relatedly, to share one's pleasure in it" (1). Indeed, Kant's popular perspective on aesthetics is woven around a question asked by him that, "The beautiful is what, without a concept, is liked universally?" (220). In a study of the concept of pure beauty in the philosophical works of Kant, Sunday Sasa is of the opinion that Kant's theory of beauty is hinged on three (3) dominant human faculties: reason, understanding and judgment. These, according to him, determine what is beautiful or not. Sasa continues by asserting that Kant conceived beauty "in terms of moments of quality, quantity, relation and modality" and as a "symbol of morality" (87), which extends to the therapeutic nature of arts. In terms of reality and unreality as is the same with objectivity and subjectivity, Kant believed that personal experience is a major factor that determines an individual's perception of these phenomena. The same is also applicable to the concept of freedom which, according to Helmut, are woven around Kant's concepts of "subjective universality" and "free play" (384). Kant's table of

judgments according to Wenzel Helmut, Comprise of: quantity, quality, relation and modernity which form the hub of Kant's aesthetic theory.

In the opinion of Abe and Ajayi, aesthetics becomes more or less a restless term when discoursing about nature and arts-related issues, and this is due to the heterogeneous manner at which it relates to both nature and arts (132). In deed the heterogeneous nature of the word is also responsible for the esoteric attribute that makes it difficult for scholars and philosophers to agree on single definition. Therefore, experience, knowledge, habit and taste play vital roles in the aesthetic sensibility of an individual. These and other cultural factors are applied to works of art and they affect the judgment of individuals as far as aesthetics is concerned (Abe and Ajayi 55).

Scholars and philosopher have reflected on the concept of "aesthetics" as a thought or idea that is based on personal experience, feeling or emotion, or as a feeling or opinion prevailing among a group of people or as an underlined feeling as distinct from the action that it brings about. This factor makes aesthetics an inseparable word from culture since most, if not all the factors that inflects aesthetic judgment are cultural in nature and practice. However, the issue of sentiment cannot be totally separated from aesthetics is for a few philosophers such as Hume and Hutcheson, a matter of sentiment (5).

If aesthetics is, however, examined from a broader perspective, it will be discovered that the perception judgment of a work of art as beautiful or sublime depends on many factors. Hence, what is beautiful to one may not be beautiful to another, thus, the relativity in the judgment of a work of art. In observing a work of art cultural factors play a major role. Therefore, it may be an injustice to pass judgment on a work of art outside the culture of the artist (Blackburn 51).

Naturally, any beautiful work of art may not be terrifying. However, if the functionalism of art is placed at the front-burner, then the beauty of ugliness might be inevitable in discoursing aesthetics in a work of art. Therefore, what is beautiful may not obey the rule of functionalism while a supposedly ugly work of art might obey the rule functionalism. Putting all the above into consideration, one can make a preamble to the concept of aesthetics as a branch of philosophy that deals with the perception of quality of beauty, sublimity and ugliness in arts and nature.

Origin of Modern Nigerian Drama

The origin of what is today referred to as modern Nigerian drama has been traced to the numerous traditional festivals and ceremonies. It is also a combination of religious or magical ritual, rhythmic dances and the song. These religious festivals and ceremonies were presented through a traditionally established order of presentation which makes Diana Devlin to define it as "periodic celebrations in which the whole community is involved" (76).

Indeed, the experience in the origin of drama in African and its comparison with the western word classifies the Nigerian drama as prototype of the Greek

theatre. Ogunbiyi observes that the origin of the Nigerian theatre and drama lies in her numerous traditional and functional rituals to found in every Nigerian society (67). Ritual as a communal activity is hinged on the belief that man craves incessantly to relate with his ancestors, deities and ultimately the supernatural being. Hence, Soyinka refers to these occasions as “one arena, one of the earliest that we know of, in which man has attempted to come to terms with the spatial phenomenon of his being” (142). Suffice it to say that, man’s desire as a member of his immediate society lies in his appreciation of his helplessness thus relying on supernatural help for virtually all his activities that surround his existence as member of society.

However, Bohme explains that the aesthetic importance of rituals cannot be disconnected from the communal life of the African people. This is because most theatre performance are done in market squares, town halls and other prominent places with the community (52). Subsequently, Kapferer in his contribution to the acceptance of ritual as the origin of drama of serves that

there was recently an opposition from a group of scholars known as the Cambridge and Anthropologists, against the notion of ritual being the authentic source of theatre... this group of Cambridge University classics... claim that the accepted statement by theatre historians that, theatre was born out of that the has been revealed as spurious, since they are based on a mistaken notion of social Darwinism... The assumption that it is possible to find a single origin of drama is in itself a problematic proposition. (67).

Kapferer further state that this group argues that drama is not one thing, but rather, a complex set of woman communicative activities involving as dose the practice of ritual fundamental woman desires to imitate, play, imaging, and structure our experience (67). Zarrilli, however, argues that argument of this group of scholars lacks the required depth since it those not at lease, suggest another source in opposition or addition to ritual that could probably serve as the origin of drama (54). Enekewe also argues that this group overlooks the fact that “a rituals become entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency” (24).

Furthermore, religious festivals and ceremonies apart of the events that bring a community together. The heterogeneous nature of this aspect of a Nigerian man is so glaring that no community is devoid of one ritual ceremony, festival, ritual or rite. Also, Nwosu in his appraisal of African drama, attests to the fact that, “Traditional African theatre manifests in the sessional festival, ritualistic performances, mythologies, folklore and fertility dances which define the existence of the African(78).

Most African Nations can boast of being the custodians of many popular festivals rites, and ceremonies that have now turned to tourist attractions for the outside word. As there are many gods or deities, tribes and lineages, so also are different festivals and ceremonies to invoke, appease, placate, mark the migration of

a lineages or celebrate the exemplary feats of deified personalities. In clear confirmation of the existence of several festivals and ceremonies in Africa, Olaniyan and Quayson asserted that, Africa houses many theatre tradition that which consists of “Culturally marked and consciously staged practices in space and time” (77). Devlin posited that every culture marks important occasions with a festival and that many of these festivals include theatre effects (34). Little wonder, Kalu Anthonia affirms the above that in most African cultures are woven around “local oral and religious traditions” (45).

An enquiry, however, reveals that drama that of these numerous festivals, the masquerade tradition was the form of entertainment that actually fertilized the origin of the Nigerian drama. Thus, David Kerr in his Keen observation of the performances of the Masquerade festivals noted that, “the masquerades could adapt to almost any topical, social or political contest, invocation and self-authorization, curse, prophesy allusion to sexual conduct, and morally comment on foreign and domestic politics, as well as remarks on religious hierarchy, history and funeral commemoration” (18).

Moreover, every social has yardstick for measuring standards of all aspects of works of arts particularly the performing arts which are embedded in their culture. The question of judging standard and value of any work of art arguably cannot be separated from people’s intuition which has been juxtaposed today with education and exposure. This question extends to the value of artistic expression, and whether the work be adjudged beautiful, sublime or ugly. This is the major concern of aesthetics in all expressive art. Therefore, within any culture ambience, aesthetics judgment is domesticated in the question of appreciation and judgment is based on cultural values. This is compulsory when one considers that a playwright or dramatist writes from his important to know that aesthetics strives on beauty, ugliness, balance and sublimity.

Concepts of Aesthetics in African Drama

Discourse on the concept of aesthetics in African drama is often inevitable without examining the cultural landscape that informed the historical and geographical settings of the drama as well as the ideological proclivity of the playwright. This means that in African drama, aesthetics is based on both the playwright and the society that houses the event in the drama.

Conclusion:

The submission above is corroborated by Obafemi who believes that any discussion on aesthetics in African drama cannot by pass and the social context in which the judgment is hinged upon (44). This is as a result of the cultural understanding of the people and the social context observed in the application of aesthetics of a work of arts that guarantee is judgment and thus must not consider the influence of Western civilization. Obafemi foregrounds his position above by postulating that:

Talking of aesthetics of the drama alone the vigorous attempts at authenticity search (the kind which concentrates on the exclusion of European formalist and models, and espouses the restriction of the essential identity features of Nigerian drama to the performance elements of rituals, festivals, ceremonies and ultimate participatory spectacles) without considering the cultural social, political and economic determinants of the theatre in the African and Nigerian context. For aesthetics judgment, any art form, and theatrical art in particular, which is corporate multi-dimensional, multisensory art, depends on its social context and its audience. (52)

Drawing from the above, any discussion on aesthetics in African drama must include the cultural ambience of the artist, the observation and opinion of the audience which most times is impacted by culture and the social context of the art work.

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