



TO CALL IT TRAGEDY OR NOT TO CALL IT TRAGEDY: THE CULTURAL POLITICS INVOLVED

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Abstract:

Tragedy as a form has always been professed with Eurocentric worldview. Juxtaposing this uniqueness directly with an Afro-centric understanding to reflect the form is challenging. Tragedy has evolved over the years, from the classical heroic model to the modern; tragedy of the common man. In order to have a blueprint closest to the tragic genre, many playwrights infuse certain indigenous elements into their plays just to make them look similar or run parallel to the original form. In seeking to connect traditional culture to performance, major playwrights in Ghana and Nigeria have utilized traditional indigenous elements; religious rites, myths and rituals as material for structure and form. It is often whispered, however, that 'Africans often laugh at tragedy'. Although the myth surrounding this conjecture is yet to be unraveled, the questions remain as: Do Africans and for that matter Ghanaians, have their own form of tragedy and can this form be suitably called tragedy or would a different name be applied? Do Ghanaians have their own kind of occurrences, disasters and catastrophes that attract more empathy and purge their emotions other than the Aristotelian form? I hope to interpret these complexities and the cultural politics involved in these creative workings.

Keywords: tragedy, cultural politics, Ghana

1. Introduction

It must be conceded that tragedy has become so synonymous with Western and Aristotelian forms that in theatre parlance, it is difficult for most African playwrights to make their style acknowledged without 'ghosting' on the original thought in one way or the other. By utilizing both Eurocentric and indigenous Afro-centric interpretations, the modern African is

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able to express his tragic form through a hybrid of classical Europe and indigenous African forms. The trend and ideologies of these playwrights reveals how the blend in their plays inevitably falls within the African tragic genre. Below are the highlights of Aristotelian Tragedy.

1. Catharsis/spiritual purgation;
2. The tragic hero must be in a high social position (e.g. Kings, queens, gods, etc.), and must possess a tragic flaw: a failure in his judgments that brings disaster;
3. There must be change of fortune involving reversal (the character's efforts boomerangs) or discovery (the character moves from ignorance to knowledge);
4. The play must be written in the highest form of poetry;
5. The plot must conform to three unities of: action, time and place.

Cathartic experience or the emotional purgation at the end of every tragic play is a very important element in both Aristotelian and African forms.

2. Works of some playwrights in Perspective

It is widely acknowledged that, Soyinka's concept of tragedy is not overtly pro-Western and not totally Aristotelian in conception yet in the mainstream, it is treasured as communalistic in African theatricality. His ideas represent many voices that see African tragedy as "The law of communal catharsis". In the Ghanaian context, *Communalism theory* emphasizes that, every individual is an integral part of the community, and the individual's success in the community is seen as a collaborative effort of all members in the community (Vordzorgbe, 2010, p. 8 & 10). For this reason, at the community level, mandatory environmental cleansing, and community precautionary rites are constantly done to compel community members to lead exemplary lives.

According to Abiodun, (2006) Soyinka is "one most misunderstood, exceedingly controversial, unnecessarily and fiercely individualistic, exceptionally gifted and radically ideological in Nigeria's public and literature life". Soyinka is one playwright who has made extensive use of indigenous cultural elements to depict his form.

Soyinka's invention of the "Fourth Stage" and his infusion of African indigenous cultural elements into his tragedies are overwhelming. His use of Ogun, Obatala and Shango (all Yoruba gods) that are likened to Dionysius, Apollos and Prometheus; (all Ancient Greek gods) demonstrate the uniqueness of his style. His employment of rituals, myth, masquerades, religious rites, dance, songs, incantations etc., as well as his idea of the 'past' which is portrayed as the ancestors, the 'present' as the living and the 'future' as the unborn helps in describing his reflection of African tragedy. The triangular illustration of this concept diagrammatically has the living at the pick; the dead on the left and the unborn at

the right. Soyinka's illustration sought to interrogate the purpose of life, and how the connections between the three are supposed to be continuous without vacuum or breakage. However, whenever a vacuum is created, tragedy occurs. The Yoruba as a people for that matter, do not see death as tragedy rather the interruption in the connection. Soyinka's play: *The Death of the Kings Horseman* is cited as an example.

In the Ghanaian context, death is seen as tragedy. That is why Opoku (1978) also refers to the *Theory of Causation*, explaining why the indigenous African and for that matter the Ghanaian wants to find out 'why things happen'. This concept symbolizes that, disease as well as illness, disaster, epidemic, drought, misfortune and even death may be caused by a broken relationship between human beings and supernatural beings. Finding solutions, prevention and cure therefore, involve the physical, the organic and the spiritual (Opoku 1978, pp.145-149).

The mutual dependency between the physical and the spiritual is so essential to the traditional African that he sees his survival as a result of his ability to harmonize both aspects of life. Any malfunctioning of either of them will have direct impact on the other.

Ghanaians' tragedy therefore depicts a unique style which is not the typical Aristotelian form and not the Nigerian style as well. My observation is that, the Ghanaian folktale or storytelling style may have been a contributory factor. The plays lean more on tragi-comedy and melodrama than the typical serious drama or tragedy. Apiah-Adjei's (2014) *The Tears of Lucifer* falls within this category.

Owusu (1983) in his *Drama of the Gods*; clarifies how a number of African playwrights have dramatized myth in various ways in their plays to portray their form. He categorizes four types of plays that did so. First is what he termed straight forward dramatization, with little or no reinterpretation by the dramatist, and he cites J.P. Clark's *Ozidi* as an example. Secondly, the interpretations of myth as a metaphor of social or cultural issues that concern the African society; where he used Obotunde Ijimere's *The Imprisonment of Obatala* as another example. The third example is the use of myth or ritual as a plot device, and Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and *The Swamp Dwellers* are cited as examples. The fourth examples are plays that transform Western myth and ritual into an African experience. Again, he affirms that, most Greek tragedy adaptations fall into this category. Rotimi's adaptation of *The god's are not to Blame* and Afua Sutherland's adaptation of *Alcestis* into *Edufa* are mentioned.

3. Arguments concerning the African Tragic Model

Tragedy is seen as a distinctive word which is likened to the 'Procrustean bed' whose universality can only be achieved through violent change or an arbitrary standard. The understanding implicitly is that, African playwrights are forced to introduce certain

indigenous elements into their plays for them to fit into the tragic genre. In other words, African playwrights must be ready to make a “violent change’ or radical adjustments in order for their plays to be recognized in this ‘universality’.

The above idea of tragedy may be comparable to the notion of the 'sublime'. Hubbard (1903) maintains that, “the sublime incorporates grandeur of thought, nobility of character, inspired passion and elevated language... and is transcendental, in the Westernized consciousness...but as consequences of this paradox, non-Europeans had to find sufficient strategies to deal with their otherness”. In other words, African playwrights must make alterations to their plays in order to fit into the hypothetical inkling.

There is however, an interesting historical twist in the above arguments. Bernal (1987) notes that, “Black Africa had prehistoric ties with people of the Greek mainland”. Localizing Africa as the major influence upon later Greek culture therefore, is nevertheless an attractive position for African playwrights to get an ancient Greek model without the compulsory noxious and intermediate conduit of Europe.

The theory of ritual for instance in ancient Greek tragedy is especially potent for African playwrights because the various religious experiences of Africans are so closely bounded together with their Greek connections. Wetmore’s (2002) explanations point to the fact that Greek adaptations become plays of self-exploration and colonial resistance, and these have helped many playwrights before and after the attainment of independence in most African countries to generate meaning.

These concerns have been raised severally in many jurisdictions that sort to explicate further the originality of Greek tragedy. In view of the arguments that Greek culture has been influenced by Egyptian/African culture, it stands to reason that the foundations of tragedy as a form may have already been laid, thus, Africans can boldly write plays in the tragic genre without necessarily ghosting or making any violent change.

3. Juxtaposing the Ghanaian and the Nigerian tragic models: The Cultural Politics involved

Ola Rotimi, at a time of tribal civil war in Nigeria, transposed Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* into *The gods are not to blame*. The play is based on the conflict between divine will (fate/destiny) and human freewill or choice. The transposition of the Greek play into an African setting fused various African indigenous elements that addressed issues of tribal war which confronted Nigeria at the time in 1968. Today, the same play may be addressing different concerns. For instance, it may be addressing feminist issues and other problems bothering on women in a typical male dominated society. Such customs and traditions which demand that widows are bequeathed to siblings and family members of their late husbands without the consent of

the woman, as done the case of Ojuola, the queen. Culture they say is dynamic so must these traditions also be modified.ⁱⁱ

Oedipus' character as Odewale, the newcomer in town, assumes his innocence, only to learn at the end, not only of the taboo of incest but also of his blood affiliations with the late king. In the play, Rotimi named Laius as King Adetusa, Oedipus as Odewale, Jocasta as Ojuola and Tiresias as Baba Fakunle. Rotimi also introduces a narrator into his version. The story is centered on Odewale who is lured into a false sense of security, only for things to turn around; he gets caught in his own web. This brings to fulfillment the terrible revelation of the Ifa priest; the diviner who prophesies that the child shall kill his father and marry his mother. In order to avert the occurrence of such an abomination, the child must not be made to live.

The concept of predestination or the idea that earthly existence is the acting out of a grand script written in the pre-terrestrial realm by supernatural powers is played out vividly in the play. Appropriately, the play demands to know what the child has brought as duty to this earth from the gods. In Yoruba tribe of Nigeria, the birth of a male child in royal family is a very important omen, because he continues the heirloom.

In the Ashante kingdom in Ghana, the opposite is the case. This is because their inheritance is matrilineal. Within Ghana among the Ewe, the story is different because their inheritance is patrilineal. *Ori*; in the Yoruba (Nigeria) and *Dzɔgbese* in Ewe (Ghana), which means destiny and/or fate, is ultimately chosen by the individual in the pre-terrestrial world. Fate and destiny are alterable in Ghana but in the Greek concept, it is unalterable. In Sophocles' tragedy however, we are exposed to fated act in a fashion that reveals a human being caught in an act that he both desperately tries to fight and equally valiantly determines to understand.

Dwelling on the main climatic events of the last scene which supposedly constitute the final fulfillment of this tragedy, Ojuola commits suicide while Odewale blinds himself and imposes on himself a self-exile after realizing that he has committed both patricide and maternal incest. These grievous actions are taboos that are abhorred by all Africans. However, the consequences and the interpretations may vary from one culture to another.

In the Ghanaian traditional context, Ojuola's suicide may first and foremost be seen as a shameful death which may attract certain rituals even before she is buried. Again, separate cemeteries are used for the burial when such abominations occur. In the second place,

ⁱⁱ A true story is told in the middle of this year 2017 in the Northern region of Ghana about a widow who was bequeathed to the brother of her late husband. As a taboo, the widow in this new marriage is not supposed to give birth to a male child, unfortunately the unexpected happened. Mother and child were exiled from the village. The boy now in his early 20s gained admission to the University with excellent scores but no helper. There was however, a reversal when a private university gave him a scholarship and he is in his first year reading his Bachelor's Degree.

Odwale's blinding of himself as a punishment may not carry any form of emotional attachments. Within certain cultural settings in Ghana, all forms of disability including blindness are abhorred by the royalty. The explanation is that if you are a royal and have any form of disability you cannot mount the throne. Opting for Odwale's 'disstoolment' or taking the title from him for instance, may be seen as a more severe punishment which may attract empathy and subsequently a cathartic effect.

4. Findings

In my opinion, tragedy to the Ghanaian is 'relative' this is because what is tragic to one ethnic group or in one culture may be comic in another. This perhaps explains why the notion is created that, *Ghanaians laugh at Tragedy*. In the African context, whatever is seen as tragic may vary from one society to another and from one culture to the other. Africans can confidently write their unique forms of tragedy using their indigenous elements without ghosting into the Greek and Aristotelian form. The use of indigenous elements such as rituals, religious rites, incantations etc. with themes such as, misfortune, natural disasters, accidents, fire outbreaks, epidemic, drowning, bareness, divorce, etc., are distinctive ways African tragedies can be represented.

5. Conclusion

The general notion that no playwright writes out of vacuum is the plain truth of all playwrights all over the world. What is different is that which distinguishes one playwright artistically from the other. Thus, their creative experiences, traditional convictions, educational background, literary or artistic orientation and aesthetic attachment are diverse ways in which their uniqueness can be portrayed in their plays.

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