

Towards the Theory of Revalorization: Revolutionary Aesthetics in the Works of Olu Obafemi and Ahmed Yerima

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Abstract

This study focuses on the revolutionary aesthetics of Olu Obafemi and Ahmed Yerima in *The New Dawn* and *Attahiru* respectively. For Olu Obafemi, the aesthetics of his drama relies principally on Marxist ideology, while Ahmed Yerima's dramaturgy is rooted in Hegelian critical theory. The reason for the intellectual debate between the 'idealist' and the 'materialist' signifies the roots that anchor the dramatist oeuvre of the radical/social playwright and the critical/liberal playwright is purely ideological. The idealist situates everything on the praxis of consciousness and that ideas control the world, while the materialist says that man's existence is on the primacy of matter as reflected in the works of the two playwrights and this ambivalence flourishes in the understanding of nature and life. The link between the two ideological divides is that social realism and critical realism have their roots in revolutionary aesthetics. This revolutionary aesthetics of both the social realism and critical realism is what I term as dialectics of revolution. The import of these divides in the body of African literature is that man is at the epicentre of these debates. African playwrights may have to rely on history, culture, socio-political, and economic situations of their society in their dramaturgies, and some factors such as personal visions, periodic essence, ideology and socio-economic and political realities may be considered by African critics as they evaluate African play-texts. Dialectics of revolution, therefore, is the dramatic search for a just society, it remains a veritable source of criticism in order to understand the inherent values in any given ideology. This study, therefore, projects that the application of dialectics of revolution developed in the theories of Revalorization for literary criticism will help to advance the course of humanity.

Keywords: revolutionary aesthetics, realism, revalorization, African, Olu Obafemi, Ahmed Yerima

The Concept of Revalorization

Theory of revalorization is the inherent values derived from historical and social theories as found in the dialectics of revolution in Nigerian theatre. Considering the dimension of the subject and the focus of this paper, the need arises to tread the path of Marxist sociological theory to externuate what the theory of revalorization is. Doing this, I shall rely on George Lukacs' Marxist sociology of literature (Lukacs, 1972). His theory is a fusion of Marxist sociological theory and Hegelian aesthetics.

Marxist sociological approach to the study of literature is concerned with relationship between the economic base of the productive and the superstructural forces of the non-economic, (such as literature, law and others). In practice, the 'economic' sphere includes the social relations of people, and the 'literary' is marketed and bought like any other product (Haslett : 2000). Goerge Lukacs' views, as a corner stone in modern literature and the Marxists' theory of art, talks about the extreme partisanship of literature where a writer becomes ideologue. He stresses that literary works consist a world-view or ideology, and system values of human typical

characters, concrete situations and multi-dimensional reality. In this direction, literature, according to Lukacs (1963, p.3) “portrays life under capitalism and exacerbates individual’ egoistic tendency and isolation”.

The approach of Lukacs emphasises content above the form of literary works, because it is not really concerned with the aesthetic style of a work of art but rather what the writer’s intention is about life. Fischer(1970) posits that the content of society is on the axial production and reproduction of life, ranging from the fact that human beings are fundamentally concerned with what to eat, drink, and be clothed and housed, to the vast array of modern tools, machines, and productive forces. So, Marxist sociological theory of literature may arise from a new set of subjects, new form of expressions, a new style, as they evolved as a result of changes in social content. Marxist approach to the study of literature insists on criticism of judging a literary work and its value on the framework of historical-materialist perspective (Bamidele, 2000, p.23) that is rooted in socialist theory of a class-struggle society.

The Marxist sociological theory posits that literature, as earlier said, is a part of the superstructure of which the state of economic development is the base. Consequently, literature relates and reacts with other elements in the social consciousness, while the other elements also influence literature reciprocally. Literature is rooted in man’s social consciousness and shaped by the society in historical and dialectical materialism. It reflects and recreates reality through the processes of cognitive, constructive and regulative ambience. Literature, being the product of human thought in society through the periods of history, grows with man in social development. This growth, however, does not move in tandem with the level the society has attained on- a- one- to- one- basis. Its height may supercede that of society, or fall below it. But each period of historical development produces the type of literature that accounts for the civilization such a society has attained. Each phase of the literature of a society, signifies and retains the strands of the past as a sap of the present to invigorate the future in continuum. The theory stresses the relationship between form and content of a work of art, that form and content cannot exist separately, unlike the bourgeois ideology which raises formalist approach above content (Lukacs, 1964, p.95).

From the foregoing, there are the lapses from the Marxist sociological theory: first, the approach raises critical point on the quality of work for its attempts to indoctrinate the mind in the service of literature and art; its effect is narrow in critical scope. Second, “the quality of work produced through marxists prescription is often seen as overtly propagandistic in tone and texture” (Bamidele, 2000, p.16). In its dialectical approach, the theory posits that elements in a thing or a process exists both in unity and opposition to one another and that the conflicts that arise from these are responsible for changes and development. It recognises that the elements in something or process do co-operate with one another but it does not uphold the fact that the complementary nature also gives rise to changes and development. This draws the instance that the bourgeois ideology of the feudal lords in a society are in opposition to the masses. This point becomes relevant in this paper when one considers the relationship between the ruling class and the masses in a postcolonial state, and it may not be too different from what the people of the old colonies experienced in the hands of their colonial masters. Lastly, the narrowness of the Marxists approach to the sociological theory emphasizes its concern for content above form. In other words, the Marxist approach to the study of literature considers no aesthetic pleasure in literature, because it concentrates on content analysis at the expense of form.

Hence, theory of revalorization elicited from the analysis above forms the background for the dialectics of revolution. Dialectics of revolution here means the evaluation of the inherent

values of the opposing ideologies considering the essence of progressive change they offer in a given society. The concept of dialectics elicits the argument between the thesis and antithesis and the associated gap that is called synthesis is not as only from the outside of it as Haslett (2000) says. It is neither as what Hegel (1977) terms as inherent, but from both (within and without), to arrive at what is termed as dialectics of revolution- the continuous change as the progression of history in its contradiction. I posit, therefore that change is the ultimate hope of bringing about the theory of revalorization. The change as the kernel of the theory defines the process of giving the new value to the order of things in a society. The theory of revalorization sustains the position in counter discourse in the paradigmatic essence between the radical/social realist and the critical/liberal dramatists in Nigeria. In this dialectical relationship, I elicit that this ideological difference strives towards positive change (revolution) is based on the *theory of revalorization*. The precept of the revalorization goes thus:

- Man conceives in abstraction which has formed the basis for the diatribe between the two opposing ideologies like idealism and materialism.
- The link between the two ideological divides is that social realism and critical realism have their roots in the aesthetics of dialectics of revolution.
- Man, being a product of his environment, is at the epicenter of the revolutionary aesthetics and the debates emanating from various ideologies.
- Revalorizing concept is the inherent values in each ideological enunciation that situate social realism and critical realism in revolutionary aesthetics.
- African playwrights may have to rely on history, culture, social-political and economic situations of their society in their dramaturgies.
- Factors such as personal visions, periodization, ideology, socio-economy and politics are the ingrains of the revalorization theory.
- The search for a just society remains a veritable source of the revalorization theory to understand the inherent values in any given ideology for a better change in society.

Olu Obafemi's *The New Dawn*

The New Dawn has multiple settings; it transits from the Central African Republic to Nigeria. In the first snap, children are enjoying their moon light plays, suddenly, soldiers fake their attacking motion, and round up the screaming children. This exposition leads to what really happens in Central African Republic under the Emperor in the second snap. Here the Emperor positions himself as the second in command to God. The youths confront him and his government, as the children experience in first snap, in his fury, Emperor, uses his might to suppress them.

The play aesthetically communicates its message in dialogue with blend of the folkloric form of music, song, dance in cinematic style. *The New Dawn* is a play that calls for a rejuvenated society rising up from the level of individualized to collectivized struggle against the ruling class that dehumanizes them.

The New Dawn is a reflection of time in motion. It reflects time in the past, when the nationalists (the native bourgeoisie) merely poise themselves for the positions that are naturally kept for the colonialists. The dreams of the elite are to occupy the positions of the colonial higher civil servants, doctors, barristers, traders, merchants, military officers, Para-military officers, and

of course the politicians in Africa, and in Nigeria especially. There is the constant attack of those foreigners, the policies and the government. In some cases it is violent. The play in its fluidity moves from Central African Republic to Nigeria, to reflect the “growing consciousness” and the “dreaming state” to ascend the prevalent power in the emergent nations of contemporary Africa that Mayomi (2005 p.52) in his “Prefatory Note” to the play calls “mecrophilism”. He goes further to say that the play not only in the flight of imagination of the playwright, but in his stark experience, “attempts to show the gains of independence as a negation of the conceived bonhomie which political freedom had earlier signified” (p.52). But so soon in the present, the realistic essence of time reflects a gory state. The political pugnacity began at the base of tribalism, ethnicism, religious bigotry, administrative naivety, and lack of purposeful leadership that resulted into pogrom in the north, the massacre, the wild, wild west, the revolution of the agbekoya in the west, the Tiv’s revolt and finally the Nigerian Civil War.

The time in future, therefore is the new dawn; the beginning of the new era. This new era marks the new process for “a rejuvenated society” of new values, or new order which the theory of revalorization projects. The play begins in Central African Republic, where children at the dawn of their lives are murdered at the Emperor’s order. In Nigeria, the play is set in a palm wine grove. The characters of Tayo, Dele, Aina Funke and Alade, in their intellectual verbiage articulate in their debates the need to rise gainst the ruling class by creating sense “of revolutionary opposition to a brutal neo-colonial regime” (Shittu, 2000 p.182), but without translating it to a concrete action. Alas!, the youngsters demonstrate courage to face, protest and fight against the unjust on the part of the rulers, who arrogate to themselves the power of life and death, drain the economic resources.

The aesthetic in the dialectics of revolution in this play by Obafemi, in his Marxian ideology, draws the class struggle between the ruling class, the native bourgeoisie on the one side and the antagonism of the peasants on the other side. The ruling class uses all the state apparatus and the state power- the guns and the soldiers; the class monopolies all the economic superstructure as doctors, nurses, civil servants, professionals, professors, politicians and contractors to suppress the base- the proletarians. The materialist understanding of life is based on the man’s cognition of nature and his social consciousness for the development of historical and economic processes. This understanding gives insight into historical and dialectical materialism with prism of logic of such processes from feudalism which was confronted and replaced by capitalism, and capitalism was in turn supplanted by socialism. This general theory of historical process is the historical materialism that becomes the dynamo of Obafemi’s revolutionary aesthetics. He consciously builds on and deals with the concrete events in his society to fight against corruption, suppression, harassment, intimidation, incarceration, assassination by the dominant class.

The playwright is critical of the elitist individuals who profess Marxism in thier willful thinking, dreaming about socialism as a way for an egalitarian society; yet, it is like they talk in mere revolutionary cants without concrete actions. This motif is reflected through the characters of Tayo, Dele, their wives- Funke and Aina and Alade who is drafted into the ‘revolutionary’ group. The venue of their formation is at Alade’s drinking spot. In this formation, they intend as a group to rouse and ignite the consciousness of the base-the peasants and proletarians against the superstructures like the Emperor, the ten percent collectors, the contractors, the military officers and their cohorts- politicians and high ranking civil servants.

Alade’s conciousness and imaginative power with courage constantly prong the rest into action which they never acted on. They talk away the brutalisation of the youths and forget the

intention to liberate the masses from the clutch of the oppressors which necessitates their meeting at Alade's shed to drink palm wine. Tayo and Dele begin play-acting the encounter they later had with his boss in the office. This is the reason why Dele and his wife, Aina arrive late to the venue. Alade becomes so disgusted by the meaningless and futile broorishness. He is pragmatic in his approach by asking them that: " proposition please. Do we organize a night raid for the commanding officer, second in command, third in command to teach them lesson?" (p. 69) The answer to Alade's question is found in Funke's proposal that all they need to do is to act instead of rhetorical discourse.

However, what the group could not do, the Youngsters are able to do. Unlike what happens in the first snap and the second snap, when the children are mauled down by the guns of Emperor. They brace up to combat, in their militant posture, marching against Emperor's army of psychopants, as mentioned earlier. The youths fire a shot, this jolts Emperor into a frenzied position, the youngsters too prance up and sing songs of hope. It is in the final moment, we encounter Alade at the dawn in the palm-grove. They make it clear to Alade that his age has failed them. It is like an echo of what Wole Soyinka called 'wasted generation', for their inability at the dawn of Independence to make positive change in Nigeria. They play hide-and seek and toss Alade up and down, in a way to inform him that their breed is weak and already done with.

It is a new dawn. The dawn of the strong breed, courageous, determined and pragmatic. The Ist Youth sums it well. He poignantly says that their breed " watch the Emperor and his retinue of sychophants and robots slaughter our mates for fun, and they intellectualize monthly"(p.87). The Youths make the point poignantly. It is not about stripping culture naked. It is not about severing the present from the past. It is just about change. This change- the new dawn, is what the Youths represent. "It is the time to change that sorry history" says Tayo (p.90). The sorry history of the Emperor's arrogance and morbid brutality, the history of the worker's strike in the colonial time, the history of Women's Revolt in 1929 in Aba, the history of Agbekoya, "or the tribal killings in Iran, Ethiopia, Somali and Nigeria" (p.91) as Ist Youth reminds us must be changed for better. The playwright uses *The New Dawn* to criticise the revolutionaries who could not match words with actions at the Final Moment Two. In this last moment, the Youths and the radicals like Dele, Tayo, Aina and Funke combined with Farmers join hands to rid the society of the dusk of death, corruption and other social vices so as to usher in the birth of a new dawn. New song of harvest replaces the ritual song of harvest by Oro cult that pervades the atmosphere until the Youths rise to the occasion. This new songs of harvest suggest regeneration, growth and progress as we witness through the action of the drama when actors dance into the audience, and the entire society dances for joy and harmony. The harvest song echoes far beyond the walls of the auditorium into the streets and everybody sings of joy.

Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru*

The title of the play, *Attahiru*, is the actual name of the hero of the play. The protagonist, Sultan Muhammadu Attahiru I, the Amir al-mu minin, ascends the Caliphate in November 1902 as the twelfth Caliph of Sokoto. The play opens to three lowly characters: Yakubu, who sells Islamic books and materials, Ahmed sells date palms and Abbas, a blind beggar, at the big entrance to a mosque. The exposition through their discussions leads us into the action of the play and we are aware of the ascension of the new Caliph and paraventure, the consequence of the friendship of the British with the Caliphate drawing examples from various encounters experienced by Kano, Zaria and other places. Abbas, the blind beggar hurries up to the Emir's palace to gain a vantage

position so as to get food and money from the affluent guests at the installation of the new Caliph.

Attahiru is a historical play. History takes a central place in the discourse of theories of postcolonial discourse. The detractors of postmodernism and post-colonialism may have realized that it is impossible for one to erase the reality of past time and prior events; if one would consider progress and fate in the development of consciousness and human nature towards tomorrow. In *Attahiru*, the significance of history is that we cannot afford to ignore the lessons of the past about the past itself, and the implications or impacts of those lessons for the historical present in order to avoid the pit-fall of the past incarnate. Yerima in his authorial perception about history of colonialism in Nigeria says, “most times, especially colonial history, as one sees one domineering force bully the minor” (Yerima, 1998 p. 6). Caliph Attahiru is the last among the 12 Caliphs. The vast territories of the United Islamic States of West Africa are already under serious colonial attacks before the short but turbulent reign of Attahiru. In the recent time, Kontagora, Bida, Zaria and Kano, all taste the venoms of the British imperialism. Obviously enough, the Sokoto Caliphate knows it is its turn to face the challenges of history. Frederick Lugard had written a letter to late Caliph Abdurrahman. Two recent ones are received from Moorland by Caliph Attahiru, but are ignored; because, “the whiteman was like a little almajiri playing in the mud, instead of seeking for alms” (p. 27). It is a dirty game the Whiteman wants to play with Sokoto.

The authority of the British Empire decides, selects and imposes whoever it deems subservient to its whims and caprices as Emir. In its ploy, Lugard stretches the hands of friendship, but Waziri can smell the evil as he says: “as I read the letter, I tell you it reeks of the satanic smell of evil. It reeks of deceit; it reeks of a subtle and cunning plot of evil mind...” (p.28). But the Caliphate resists its imperial tactics without adequate preparation to face the onslaught of the superior power. History of British dominion over other societies in the Caliphate like Kano and Kastina in the recent time informs the people of Sokoto what awaits them as Madawaki observes: “we saw what he has done to the people who have resisted his tactics, and we say no... it is clear that in the Whiteman’s book of friendship, might is right... (30)”. Madawaki’s statement is concomitant to the assertion drawn by Yerima in his authorial note that, “most times, history as told by great historians evokes sympathy, especially colonial history, as one sees one domineering force bully the minor one” (p.6).

In the process of resistance to the imposition of the Imperial power by Caliph in defence of Islam and in honour of Sokoto, the idea of revolution is implanted on the mind of people. This determination is noted in the some characters, especially, Abass, the blind beggar. In the moment of pandemonium in the city, when everybody is running under cover, the British expedition is already taken over Sokoto, a new Caliph is imposed, yet Abass with the assistance of his collaborator, Ahmed, want to get to Burmi, so he can fight along side with Caliph Attahiru. He believes he should die in defence of Islam.

The two characters are caught and brought before Lord Lugard. Abass pretends to be a seer who has a message for the whiteman. Lord Lugard is patient to hear him. He is not surprised to hear Abass say he is ready to fight the infidels because his “heaven will be secured. Jihad will continue with or without me. I am only a blind insignificant beg...” (p.56). Abass is determined to die for the course of Islam. He only comes in the company of his ally, Ahmed to the whiteman to stop the war. Telling him that it is not African culture to force oneself as a friend on another person. Then why should the British in the name of friendship wants to take forcefully, by the way of expedition, what belongs to other? Abass’ message is clear.

The history of the British expeditions had the same spine of plot from Opobo to Warri, from Benin to Ijebu, from Igala to Kontogora, and from Kano to Sokoto. The essence of this penetration was to rule the 'Niger Area'. Caliph Attahiru Ahmadu, like his predecessor Caliph Abdul-Rahman earlier says that, "the only relationship that can exist between a believer and an infidel is war" if his letter to Lord Lugard marks the line for a war! The Caliphate rises to defend Islam. The British avows to enter Sokoto. This conflict generates crises and culminates to war and at last Attahiru dies in Burmi with over ninety-nine soldiers. They fight gallantly to defend Islam and the honour of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1903, after his brief stay as a Caliph for less than six months.

The eclectic nature of Yerima's thoughts and the aesthetics of his dramaturgy provide a platform for his multi-dimensional dramaturgic approach of a liberal/critical realist approach that engages in individual heroism, unlike the materialist approach of Obafemi, who engages collective heroism, according to Adeoti (2007 p. 50) as he says "Yerima's plays, in terms of literary and theatrical devices, are intriguingly eclectic". Yerima like a critical realist derives artistic influences from various dramatic traditions. In his eclecticism, he is influenced by the Classical Greece, Renaissance Europe, Irish drama to Brechtian epic theatre, African traditional and folk theatre. In this wide range of possibilities, he explores the dramatic innovations and experimentations in order "to be relevant to the society". Yerima's revolutionary aesthetic finds ritual and religion, music and songs, mask and dance, as ready elements to embellish his dramaturgy to authenticate the African cultural identity in the process of the theory of revalorization and this underscores the Hegelian concept of civil society.

Conclusion

This study extenuated the revolutionary aesthetics of Olu Obafemi and Ahmed Yerima dialectically. In this regard, it has brought to bear the need to study each playwright not on his ideological perception alone, but on his search for a just society which the *theory of revalorization* suggests. Hence, dialectics of revolution remains a veritable source for African dramatic criticism in order to understand the inherent values in any given ideology for a better change in society.

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