

## Tracing back the History of African Theatres – Apropos to the dramatic legendry of Wole Soyinka

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African Literature in English has created a new facelift to the commonwealth literature. This has brought to limelight some of the great African writers to this world. The growth of African Literature helped to represent the struggle of African people which the politicians failed to represent. The African writers concentrated on the disintegration of the typical cultural pattern of their culture and tradition and were exposed to new ideas and knowledge from the western world. But contemporary African writers have surpassed these and followed the commitments towards the universe. The ideas, facts and all those presented in their writings gave a clear picture of the very humanity itself. There were many important writers of this period. One such contemporary writer is Wole Soyinka, who has produced his works in multitude of genres such as drama, novel and poetry. He made Yoruba beliefs and morals known to people across the globe. He was the first person to have been awarded the highest of an accolade, the 1986 Nobel Prize.

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Drama, amidst the stage genres of literature, reflects the actions of man viz., the channel of communicate, images, illustrations, outfits, etc. The characters in the drama imitate and represent the characters in the real world. Drama has gained much attention recently as it is more serious in nature. Fiction, represented in action was drama in ancient times. The word ‘drama’ originated from Grecian language was used to talk about action. The first one who used the word ‘drama’ was Thespis, a Greek deity to enhance religious activities like dancing choirs with a costumed, masked person to express a part of the action in meaningful words and gestures. Since then drama has been used to indicate the art which represents a human event in the presence of a more or less involved audience which is focused on the man.

In the beginning, the performances in a show are generally sung from the beginning to end and are associated with music and dance. The musical piece includes both dialogues and

songs. In certain periods of ancient Roman and modern Romantic history, the dramas were written to be read rather than performed.

Acting has raised a lot of interest and it is one of the effective ways of communicating and passing across moral values, cultures, etc. It has been a very useful medium used in theatre arts to promote indigenous cultures. Drama is an art, written in a style that facilitates stage performance. In its text form, drama is usually read as a story unfolding itself through the dialogues of the various characters and stage directions. Of all literary genres, drama comes closer to the language of the common man.

In the beginning, the Romans used religious dramas in England to enlighten the unlettered English masses. They enacted mystery and miracle plays in the church to describe the creation of the world, Noah's flood, Christ's sacrifice and the lives of Saints. Later, they brought certain comic and rustic elements in morality plays to attract the audience. Then the drama shifted from church to the woods near the villages in ancient England.

The origin of African drama owes its development to the prevalent religious practices and folklore stories. It is a highly complex, multi-disciplinary performing art, tracing its development far back into black African traditions. In traditional African society, storytelling, song and dance are the fundamental media for the transmission of most cultures and are closely integrated with a rich inheritance in the visual arts and crafts. The multitudinous tribal groups which constitute this vast continent, with their thousands of vernacular languages and their different lingua franca imposed on them by colonizing powers, have been more successful than many similarly afflicted societies in preserving their cultural identities. Oral societies have kept their folklore through professional storytellers and the widespread custom of families gathering around the fire on moonlit nights to tell moral tales, pose riddles, sing songs and enact their own characteristic dance-dramas. Their history and religious celebrations were recorded in folk festivals and ritual ceremonies with roots, deep enough to survive the new religion brought in by the missionaries and colonial governors.

Using the aesthetics of Africans, African theatres are flourished by African writers. It is meant for the African audience but it has also received a world-wide acclaim. The African experience of drama is easily traceable to the creation of man and other animate phenomena because it reflects man's regular activities, his environs and the archetypal symbols and ritualistic performances. This experience originated in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Africa.

One can find the Egyptian topics and social reflection in African theatres when one comes over the authentic proof of the Egyptian sacrosanct dramatization celebrated in 2000 BC. The classical celebration of the incredible medieval Judeo-Christian myth among others has moreover contributed to the development and advancement of the modern African dramas. African writers tried their hands at all the genres of literature, viz., tragedies, comedies, tragic-comedies, melodramas and farces. But comedies are the most appropriate genre for African society as tragedies are often associated with classical age.

The contemporary writers and the critics in the African drama and theatre give more importance to general criticism, autobiographical sources and ideological content of the plays. They seldom give much importance to performance. An attempt has been made to analyze the African drama through historical, social, archetypal and even modern contexts.

Theatre is a written literature which is expressed through stage performance. A drama manifests itself through the dialogues and emotions of various characters and stage direction. It is both an art which has been industrialized to express the culture through artists. It tries to draw the attention of the audience by using artistic elements to create a tragic, comic, tragic-comic, or day-to-day life depictions.

The theatre brings out the religious and communal backgrounds, thoughts, feelings, dreams and unique personalities. In political terms, theatre can be utilized as a powerful weapon to spread communal values or vice-versa. The theatre was born when the human being came into existence. The theatre makes way to communicate with others, share an experience and stimulate a reaction to others. It is only with the advent of the self-willed, philosophic, and aggressive Greeks, theatre is taken out of the hands of priests and kings and became everyone's art.

In view of its liveliness and intensity of themes, African literary works get prominence in the Commonwealth Literature. However it uses English for its oral literature in the various dialects of Africa. African writing shows an intense scholarly, social and literary activity. African literature paves way for cultural assimilation and improves the socialization of the young people. Social and National awareness have been bred in the bone of the people. The present day African writers try to restore the reputation of Africans by concentrating on the native and diasporic Africans in their work of art.

African traditional society has its own saying, song, dance, drumming, mask and costume for every aspect of life from the cradle to the grave. These offer the makers of African

theatre inexhaustible sources of plot, language, dramatic idiom and visual devices, all drawn from their traditional roots of the special power for the African spectator.

The theatre reflects the life of the people's festivals, rituals, mythology and other forms of social engagement. But for the Africans, it is a medium through which they find out their reality. Moreover, the African man's contact with the colonial world has erased some of the important African values. But today, the African literature has found its way into the hands of the African playwrights who had achieved their aim in bringing about a real, innocent and correct version of the native Africans.

Only after the British took over Lagos in 1861, separate British and African performing groups emerged. These groups were formed by the home coming slaves who called it the Brazilian drama company and they even had a drama critic. Their plays were based on Shakespeare and were taken as a model of polite behaviour by the new African elite. Therefore, there is a need for a study of the historical and social traditions that pave the way to modern-day African drama and theatre. It also focuses on criticism, autobiographical elements and ideology of the present day Black theatre.

Africa's modern drama depicts their sufferings under the colonial powers of British, French, Belgians, Spaniards and Portuguese and the political crisis the continent faced since the World War Second. They also portray the change of trends and fashions in modern Africa and negritude, the black aesthetic ideology and mystique launched by the Martinique born Aimé Césaire. Though it has European influence, it is clearly native in setting, atmosphere and theme; and it often flashes the light on the darkest things like the violence that erupted in national liberation as well as internal struggles. Whites often find a negative place in all the black dramas despite the fact that many of these dramas were written by them.

Theatre in African dramatic literature is classified into two types - the ancient natural world (dance form) and the other is a drama of man in contemporary society. Dance is the ancient form of African dramas which brings together their religious community. Their dramas were ceremonial, ritual, festive and entertaining. The ancient African drama also talks about birth, marriage, puberty, and harvest festivals. Their culture and religion are manifested through the celebrations of the beginning of a hunt, and the honour they gave to their demi-gods and ancestors and the end of the mortal life. Traditional African literature survived through their strong oral tradition and served as an energizing force in the public life. The stories became dialogues and a drama in course of time when the story passes from one man to another. Now in the drama of man in contemporary society, the native dance and rituals have

found a place in a man's daily life through the theatres. But still these new African dramas can never achieve the originality of the native oral dramatic plays.

Of all the African nations, Ghana and Nigeria have the most active theatre and the richest dramatic literatures. Professor. J.H. Kwabena Nketia, of the School of Music and Drama of the University of Ghana, together with Efua Sutherland, Head of the Ghana Drama Studio of the Institute of Art and Culture, play an outstanding role in developing the National Theatre in Ghanaian native drama. The British colonies of Nigeria and Ghana have so far shown their mettle in playwriting and theatrical production. The contribution of Nigeria to the growth of African theatre is enormous.

The roots of Nigerian theatre can be traced back to the folklore stories of Senegal and Nigeria. Five centuries ago the ancient Mali Empire (historically known as Manden Kurufaba) had skilled entertainers of all kinds – storytellers, dancers, jugglers, magicians, etc. In Black Africa, the traditional performances in church and social groups, schools and colleges, go back only a century and the advent of African plays is very recent when compared to the former. Dramatic writing became a serious vehicle for the interchange of ideas and the projection of Africa. African English literature has addressed several social issues of Africa. African writers have written enough of their existing society and to create awareness among their people to strike a right balance between their tradition and modernity. Soyinka insists on his fellow writers to write about his tradition. He recalls his writers to address the past while speaking about the need for an African writer, Soyinka in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* says:

The African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past. Of course, the past exists, the real African consciousness establishes this – the past exists now, this moment, it is co existent in present awareness. It clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence, and it is vitally dependent of the sensibility that recalls it. (18-19)

The most exciting and prominent Nigerian playwrights were Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark and James Henshaw. They made wonders in developing the most active Black Theatres in the continent. For the artistic standards of African drama, the University of Ibadan founded a drama school – the Rockefeller Foundation.

African Literature in English has created a new facelift to the commonwealth literature. This has brought to limelight some of the great African writers to this world. The western education helped many African writers to represent the feelings, mental agony and sufferings of their own people. Colonialism made the Africans suffer in spite of their resources and long

heritage. The education they received from European countries helped them to reflect the society in its reality and projected the inner life of the Africans in a subtle way in European languages. Thus the social realities and the inner life of the Africans were brought to the people of the world in a picturesque form. The growth of African Literature helped to represent the struggle of African people which the politicians failed to represent. The African writers concentrated on the disintegration of the typical cultural pattern of their culture and tradition. They opened the eyes of the Africans to live a life of Africans built in western ideas. They trained every Africans to live a life of African in blood but European in thought. They laid more stress on the fusion of individual values to the societal norms. The writers were exposed to new ideas and knowledge from the western world. Negritude and African civilization, and ethos of the African people were echoed on many of the African writers. But contemporary African writers have surpassed these and followed the commitments towards the universe. The ideas, facts and all those presented in their writings gave a clear picture of the very humanity itself. There were many important writers of this period. One such contemporary writer is Wole Soyinka.

Wole Soyinka is a member of the Yoruba people, who has formed one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The language, myths and customs of the Yoruba tribes are prevalent in most of his plays. Soyinka's spiritual heritage is a twin heritage. The Yoruba world in which he grew up was one that had been heavily infused with Christian doctrine and symbolism.

Soyinka's writings regularly make utilization of Christian images. Often, Soyinka has to defend his stance and his fellow poets' unwitting usage of the archetypal Christian images. Both African conventions and Christianity have profound impact on Soyinka's mind and influenced him from the earliest starting point of his inventiveness to the latest works. Indeed the plays show in personal terms the conflict of cultures inherent in the political situation of the city-dwellers. The tension is not as foreign as it has been made to sound in some plays, for it is not only between generations, but also between an ancient aristocracy and a new technocracy, between traditionalism and westernization, between the dignity of the old and the sprawling vulgarity of the new.

Soyinka portrayed gaudiness, defilement, administration and false reverence in present-day urban life through his works. His theatrical special effects are visual, dance, bells, mime, drums, and songs. These are used frequently throughout the Yoruba celebrations which are

celebrated openly and lavishly because of its cultural importance. As a declaration of social progression, the dead and the divine beings become ubiquitous and celebrate with the living.

Soyinka deals with religion, folklore and African past in his writings. Yoruba gods predominant his plays as they have been portrayed for centuries to depict the traditions and customs of the indigenous people. His dramas highlight the sufferings and hardships of the Africans. Commenting on Soyinka's attitude towards life, Oyin Ogunba in *The Traditional Contents of the plays of Wole Soyinka* states that:

Soyinka has the reputation in certain circles in Nigeria . . . of being the artist par excellence in an ultra-modern, twentieth century sense, a man against the establishment, a firm believer in the absolute freedom of the individual. (6)

Critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his *Wole Soyinka: Mythopoesis and the Agon of Democracy* stated that:

Soyinka is a master of the verbal arts. His English is among the finest and most resonant in any literary tradition, fused seamlessly as it is with the resonances and music of the great lyrical, myth-dense, Yoruba tradition. (194)

He enriches the understanding of contemporary dramatic experience and suggests that the effects of drama change according to the usage of general and well known ritual rites all around the world.

Wole Soyinka won the 1986 Nobel Prize for literature and became the first African to win the highest medal of honour for writing. Critics have found his dedication towards social changes and human rights in Nigeria. He combines traditional Yoruba folk drama with traditional Yoruban culture, dance and music popular in urban cultures to create a satirical effect. According to him, an artist records his experience and vision in African society and brings out a change with a view to reconciling tradition and modernism. His general subject is not only the man on the earth, who lives in forests but also about the entire race of Africa.

Soyinka's plays are enriched with different dance forms. According to him, the different aspects of religious beliefs, the quintessential themes of birth and death and the metamorphosis of human to the divine essence can be best represented in the dance forms. His plays are a balanced combination of the mythical and realistic elements. He has used prose and verse in the plays in order to highlight the innate qualities of African culture. Undoubtedly, Soyinka has presented the living significance of African heritage and culture to the world.

It is understood that the recent writings in African literature have achieved its standard only through the contemporary writers like Wole Soyinka who without any expectation

explored not only the history of the Africa and its culture but also put forth the universal theme of human resistance through his plays. Such writings in Africa pave a way for the growth of African literature and its culture.

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