



---

**JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND  
COMMUNICATION STUDIES (GOSAJOLLCOS)**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY**

**MAIDEN EDITION**  
November, 2020



©Department of English, Gombe State University

**MAIDEN EDITION**

November, 2020

**All rights reserved.**

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without prior permission of the Department of English, Gombe State University.

**PUBLISHED BY:**

Jos University Press Ltd.,  
No. 15, Murtala Mohammed Way,  
Jos Plateau State, Nigeria.

**COVER DESIGN:**

Saviour Bassey  
Phone: 08068160241  
E-mail: savior4real75@yahoo.com



## An Analysis of Major Themes, Structures and Forms in Selected Modern African Drama

Kingsley I. Ehiemua

### Abstract

*Modern African drama consists of Africa's written plays. It is an artistic endeavour which grew out of two literary cultures: the Indigenous oral and the Western dramaturgical traditions. This paper, therefore, is a descriptive review of major themes and forms of written drama across Africa. The review is restricted in scope to selected popular plays of established African writers, which have inspired popular categorisations of modern African drama based on their themes and forms. This paper reveals the progress in this specific literary genre of African literature and affirms that it has helped to give the uniqueness that has undoubtedly distinguished it as an established literary tradition. In this review, it is also observed that the wide varieties of cultural, historical and political experiences of Africa have helped to influence and shape the emergence of the themes and forms of her written plays, though the same can be said about the two other genres of the continental literature, namely, prose and poetry. This review has the potentials of reminding African and non-African literary scholars that the peculiar experiences of a people play a tremendous role in shaping their literature and the literary standards that should be used in judging their literature. The paper concludes that judging by the variety of its themes and formal features, the written dramatic tradition in Africa has grown in leaps and bounds such that it has become a veritable source of narrative knowledge.*

**Keywords:** *Modern African Drama, African Literature, Literary Forms, African Experiences*

### Introduction

The variety of themes and forms in modern African drama has unarguably been an unmistakeable indicator of its growth and significance as a literary tradition. However, the themes in the non-drama genres of modern African literature have also preoccupied the creative imagination of modern African dramatists. Tanure Ojaide convincingly describes how differently the motif of cultural distinctiveness dominates the thematic concerns of modern African literature. According to him, the 80's saw modern African literature gaining worldwide recognition, heightened by Wole Soyinka winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, but that written African literature is very new compared to the indigenous African oral tradition of literature which is old and very much alive (43). Citing Abiola Irele, he affirms that the "essential force" of modern African literature is "its reference to the historical and experiential" (44), which have given rise to its various distinctive cultural markers that are understood in this paper to influence its major themes.

According to Ojaide, the first cultural marker of African literature is the "ethical and moral nature of African civilization". Here, he identifies the inter-relatedness of literature and morality as a heritage of both cultures (Indigenous and Western) which gave birth to Modern African literature (44). Ojaide further affirms



that the degree of prominence of this element in the oral literary tradition seems to have influenced the didactic pre-eminence of all the genres of its written offspring in Africa more than the Western literary legacy (44). The second is the utilitarian function. He affirms “that there is, culturally speaking, no art for art's sake in Africa; every literary work has a social function”; and that “modern African literature is the repository of the cultural life of the people and is a major source of education for the young everywhere and urban people who have lost touch with their roots” (44-45). Other cultural features identified by Ojaide which manifest in different creative works of modern African literature include: its sometimes socially cohesive nature in which it emphasizes a strong sense of community; affirmation of faith in defence of African culture “against alien encroachment and prejudices”; emphasizing a belief in mystical power, the portrayal of African traditional order and justice as opposed to its concept in the Western/colonial belief; the emphasis on land to which “Africans are bound mystically”; its common recourse to folklore from which trickster motifs, mythological deities, legendary or historical deities, a belief in divination or ritual sacrifices, etc, are imported as metaphors or inherent signifying elements (45-53). Others are the emphasis on the cyclical nature of African time and space in the literary form and vision; the peculiarity of language in modern African literature seen in the often interspersed proverbs, axioms, rhythms and oratorical structures with the chosen linguistic medium (foreign, indigenous or pidgin); the universality of its message, sometimes evident in the use of archetypal images and symbols (53-55). Ojaide's broad outline may be seen as both ideological and formalistic.

Separating thematic concerns from formal qualities in distinguishing modern African drama also appears to be the challenge of Oyin Ogunba and Ademola O. Dasylva. Ogunba's broad thematic categories include: propaganda plays that are of political and ideological nature; plays dealing with culture and nationalism or new cultural visions; and the satiric plays (92). Dasylva's categorization is more detailed as he identifies African plays to include those that have culture as their subject matter, which include plays such as Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards*, Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* and Joe de Graft's *Sons and Daughters*, Ene Henshaw's *This is our Chance*, and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, and Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot*. Under this category, Dasylva states that such plays “constantly probe the newly acquired European values” or they “take cognizance of the signification of African culture” (117-118).

Dasylva's second category of plays consists of those that portray nationalist visions. Under this, he lists Ebraheim Husein's *Kinjeketile*, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* or Ngugi and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I will Marry When I Want*, Maishe Maponya's *The Hungry Earth*, Fugard's *The Island and Sizwi Bansi is Dead*, Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon's *Wóza Albert!*. Also included are Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*, *Opera Wónyonsi* and Kole



Omotoso's *The Curse*. These nationalist themed plays deal with “political struggles with nationalist objectives” during colonial era or condemn post-colonial disillusionment and political oppression of the masses (118).

The third category consists of plays that Dasyuva lists under rational outlook, because according to him, they “fuse cultural and national objectives” (no reference) and portray elements which foreground the quest for political salvation. These include Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, *Death and the King's Horseman* and *A Dance of the Forests* (119). The last category includes plays that are neo-rational in the treatment of the authors' ideological vision because they use “rather “novel” theatrical experience” to subvert “the essential syntax of cultural beliefs”. Under this category, Dasyuva groups Osofisan's plays. According to him, in the plays which fall under this category, “culture no longer functions at the level of mundane romanticization of some morbid, moribund values, but is put at the service of the nationalistic quest for political salvation” (119).

In Sam Ukala's essay, “Politics of Aesthetics”, he may not have intended to distil major themes in modern African drama but rather to describe prominent stages of theatre evolution in Africa in terms of structure and style (or aesthetics). But his categorization cannot help but imply some unique thematic preoccupations which motivated the different phases of theatre development and which were inspired by Frantz Fanon's three phases of African writer's evolutionary stages of awareness. These are: first, period of assimilation into the colonial master's world view and art; second, the phase of going back to his roots to re-assert his identity; and third, the phase of re-integrating with his aggrieved people in their political struggle against imperialist designs and oppression.

According to Ukala, the drama that came out from the first and initial phase can be labeled “theatre of Surrender” which saw the African dramatist helplessly assimilating both the artistic values and forms of his colonial master. The African was therefore satisfied with producing “hack and/or abridged translations, adaptations or reproductions of popular European plays, music and dance” in African dialects. Examples of such creative works are Solomon Plaatje's translation of Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors* into Setswana; Julius Nyerere adapting into Kiswahili Shakespeare's *Julius Ceaser*; and Professor R. O. Coker, “the first native organist in Nigeria”, organizing a “Handel festival”, which became “a prestigious event”. The second phase “yielded the theatre of re-awakening” in which dramatists adapted “African legends, myths and folktales as well as the history of African heroes such as Chaka of South Africa, Tanimoune of Central Sudan, and Alboury N'Diaye of Côte d'Ivoire”. According to Ukala the aim of the dramatists of this phase “is to show off the greatness of Africans and their culture, not to criticize them”. The third is the phase of political struggle and the fourth phase is one in which the dramatist “adapts remembered traditional sources”, “moves beyond 'remembering'”



to researching and experimenting with his findings”. According to Ukala, the fourth phase of the theatre – the phase of researching and experimenting - is one in which the dramatist is liberated in both ideological conviction and artistic form; he praises or condemns the former colonial master, his own king, political leaders or god. Ukala further states that what has however emerged from the phase of “research-and-experimentation” is the alternative theatre under which he groups the plays of the travelling theatres of Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and the written drama of Osofisan, Clark-Bekederemo, Rotimi, Osofisan, Ngugi, Husein, Aidoo, Sutherland, Mukotani Rugyendo, his (Ukala's) own plays, and others (30-32).

In his Inaugural lecture entitled “African Dramatic Literature: To Be or To Become”, Rotimi identifies major thematic concerns of African literature. He contends that “these concerns have been in response to the socio-historical traumas of the African peoples themselves.” Rotimi names Negritude as Africa's first major theme because it was the era of colonialism then and “the passion of African literature was for the redemption of the integrity of the Black man” and that the fixation was quite valid in the face of sustained foreign domination”. The second was the theme of culture conflict. He asserts that: “under this head, the African writer not only appraised the cultural dilemma that bedevilled our peoples, especially in the 1950's and 60's, he also helped, through pointed laughter or shared anguish, to sedate our people under such stresses”. In the mid-sixties, a third theme emerged, which Rotimi traced to the publication of Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* which began the trend of depicting the political, economic and social failure of Africa's political independence. The resulting disillusionment gave rise to anger and protest which both reflected in literary creativity. Merging the two words, 'protest' and 'anger,' Rotimi calls the resulting theme “angst” – the theme of “Angst”. The fourth major theme, Rotimi calls the “theme of Utopian models”, which he characterized as “a theme of hope in the face of seeming unrelieved, national despair” (6-7).

Ogunba, Dasyuva, Ukala and Rotimi's varying enthusiastic classifications of 'form-motivated-thematic' concerns of modern African drama may be seen as being very broad and confusing, especially as some of the categories overlap into the other. That is, some of the plays cited in one category can also fit into one or more other categories they outlined. For instance, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* which Dasyuva identifies as falling under the rationalist vision also manifests strongly as one under his culture themed drama considering the play's content, dramatic action and some of the inherent perceivable connotations to the reader in spite of the playwright's advice to not do so in the authorial note. Also, Ukala's classification of Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* under his fourth group named 'researched and experimental plays', can also pass for a theatre of political struggle in terms of thematic focus and style; which he identifies as the third phase of theatre development in Africa.



Further, their broad categories are political in nature, assessing modern African drama from the perspective of projection of African socio-political values or majorly as a critique of African society on the basis of the endemic contemporary political disillusionment or mass economic deprivation. This does not reflect the wide range in the scope of modern African literature even though Léopold Sédar Senghor declared that “African literature is politically committed” (Wuthier 144). Those categorizations ignore plays which specifically focus on man's ambivalent nature, greed, betrayal, domestic violence or psychologically motivated human failings under a social or domestic setting such as Wale Ogunyemi's *Divorce*, Joe de Graft *Through a Film Darkly*, Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath*, Nanabenyin Kweku Watemberg's *The Corpses Comedy*, Clark-Bekederemo's *Wives Revolt*; or, African plays which depict absurd human situations such as Rotimi's *Holding Talks* and Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft*. Plays in these groups whose thematic and formal or structural peculiarities have been left out in the earlier cited categorizations are very many to ignore in the thematic and structural classifications of modern African drama.

The tendency to use only political principle to determine the thematic and formalistic classification of modern African drama may mislead non-African critics who read such critical efforts, and it may detract them, or anyone else, from the rich varieties, versatility and potentialities of African literature as a whole. Such tendency will encourage a non-African literary critic and reader of African creative works to believe, for instance, the misconceived and naive notion of Per Wästberg in 1974, and others like him, about modern African literature and other enlightenment activities in Africa, that:

Perhaps one is most fair to African literature if one sees it as a documentary literature: testimony that is intended to be useful. The sense of political obligation is shared by almost all writers. In fact, a parallel development may be seen in almost all areas of cultural activity in Africa. The historian works to mask the barbarism of colonial conquest and to resurrect the chiefs who resisted it. The ethnographer polemicizes against those who doubt Africa's ability to bring about a civilization. (136)

Wästberg wrote that opinion for a literary journal, *Daedalus*, in the 1970s when many of the great masterpieces of African works in prose, drama and poetry, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, Ngugi's *Weep not Child*, *The River Between*, Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, *A Dance of the Forests*, Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*, and host of other African creative works, have been written; and are still regarded as classics even by non-African literary critics and readers.



What the lapses in thematic categorizations, mentioned earlier, imply is that with the large corpus of modern African plays occasioned by the ever widening socio-economic and socio-political landscape as well as the pertinent duty to re-evaluate Africa's cultural heritage, outlining themes of modern African drama (or literature) will always be an inexhaustible task. It may, nevertheless, seem convenient for a critic to state major themes along his artistic and ideological preferences like what Ogunba, Rotimi, Dasylva, Ukala, Ojaide, and some non-African literary critics have been doing, even if such efforts are regarded as oversimplifying, over-generalizing, restrictive or preferential.

### **Forms and Themes in African Drama**

The major themes in modern African drama are the themes of Negritude, history, culture-conflict, generation-conflicts, protest, political and social disillusionment, socio-cultural and self critical appraisal, metaphysics or man and the supernatural, man and his environment, philosophical as well as mundane themes of love, greed, deceit, betrayal, hypocrisy, etc. These themes have been portrayed in modern African drama through structural frames that include the western type well-made plays of linear plots in acts and/or scenes, modernist avant-garde or experimental forms, traditional ritual forms, mythological, folkloric, satiric, operatic, tragic and comedic, agit-propaganda/guerilla dramaturgies, etc. Sometimes, the creative impulse behind the drama combines two or more of these structural or stylistic frameworks to achieve the playwright's artistic goal. Truly, many writers (African dramatists not exempted) are known to have some of their works cut across the thematic and artistic boundaries above. Soyinka in his *ADance of the Forests*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, *Opera Wonyonsi*, *Lion and the Jewel*, *Camwood on the Leaves*, *The Road*, *Kongi's Harvest*, is one such playwright.

A study of Soyinka will reveal him as a tragedian, philosopher, a historian, an indigenous culture defender, a social commentator and satirist, who is not an optimist in his plays (Robert F. Mcdowell 25). His works are not only critical of both traditional and modern societies, but always take the side of tradition over modernity. For instance, *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Strong Breed*, the disruption of the traditional sense of order and justice by modern forces or modern consciousness leads to the plays' tragic conflicts and social disorientation. In the plays, ritual elements and a belief in traditional metaphysics influence dramatic action and its symbolic meanings. Soyinka translates the Yoruba world-view and tragic myth into dramaturgy.

According to Soyinka, the performance of *Death and the King's Horseman* can only be realized through "evocation of music from the abyss of transition" (Soyinka's *Death* 7). In the play, Elesin is the protagonist of the Yoruba community, just as Ogun in the Yoruba world-view. According to Soyinka, Ogun (the Yoruba



traditional god of creativity and destruction) was the protagonist in the tragic myth or ritual drama of archetypes who experienced the process of “being literally torn asunder in cosmic winds” and rescues himself from total dissolution by harnessing his will to restore the gulf of transition between man and the deities for the benefit of mankind (*Myth* 30). Elesin's ritual death, to the community of the play, is a re-enactment of the Ogun principle for a renewal and reinforcement of cosmic order and material progress. But unlike Ogun, Elesin fails because of his worldly cares and irresponsibility. This underscores the play's tragedy. His first son, Olunde, who is undergoing medical training in London, willingly dies in place of his father. Elesin's suicide in order to attempt to reclaim some lost honour in the traditional community becomes a waste. From other signifiers in the play, it also speaks of destructive power of the colonial forces on traditional culture even with the deep irony of Olunde's death; there are also other underlying connotations from the play's dramatic action such as human greed and betrayal.

Mcdowell rightly states that, in *The Lion and the Jewel*, with the loss of the village belle by the school teacher, Lakunle, to the old scheming Baroka, the Baale of the village, “the over cerebral mind has been denied a victory. Rather it is the more primitive mind, the vitality and the imagination of the old man which has triumphed” (25-26). Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*, *The Jero Metamorphosis*, *The Road* and *Kongi's Harvest* are among his satirical plays.

While the first and the second plays ridicule society for its gullibility, sycophancy and religious hypocrisy; the third using traditional ritual and religious idioms, is an indictment on the failure of government to address the poor conditions of the Nigerian roads and other infrastructure as well as the people's pecuniary interests over safety and sanctity of lives. And *Kongi's Harvest* is a ridicule of political dictatorship and its attendant power abuse.

Another prominent Nigerian dramatist, Clark-Bekederemo, like Soyinka, Rotimi, Ebrahim Husein, Sutherland, etc, is among the African dramatists who have pioneered the integration of mythology and folklore into the fabric of written African drama. One of Clark-Bekederemo's themes is the portrayal of a metaphysical reality arising from the tragic consequences of breaching a traditional injunction in a rural riverine religious community as in his *Song of a Goat*. The play's sequel, *The Masquerade*, is an extension of a family curse as an individual experience, dramatically realized with an adapted popular folktale motif of the disguised monster husband who wins the hands of the proud village's beautiful maiden. *The Raft*, the last play in the trilogy, dwells on the theme of man's helplessness in the face of an imminent disaster, presumably beyond his control, which many, including Osofisan, have interpreted as an allusion to the troubled state of Nigeria a few years after independence. *Ozidi* is considered “Clark-Bekederemo's most ambitious play and probably his best” (Abiodun Adetugbo 188) probably because the original source of



the play is an Ijo traditional saga which is an epic narrative that takes several days to perform but is compressed by the playwright into a written drama performed in less than three hours on a theatre stage. Clark-Bekederemo's dramatic version of the Ijo saga has themes such as universal human fortunes and reversals, indomitable human will, vengeance (Adetugbo 188) and individual and communal purgation of evil (Dan Izevbaye 170).

The Ghanaian Joe de Graft's *Sons and Daughters* deals with the theme of generational conflicts, his *Through a Film Darkly* dwells on betrayal and interracial tension. Both plays were written in the style of a well-made play of the European literary realism. *Sons and Daughters* ends happily when the parents find that the career choices their third son, Aaron and their only daughter Maanan prefer as opposed to their wishes for them can be lucrative and can command dignity like the engineering and legal professions they wanted for the children. In *Through a Film Darkly*, the protagonist John has a devastating encounter with the white world when he was resident in London because his white ex-fiancée has no regard for his humanity as an African. She only dated him in order to use him for a specimen in her sociology class which now makes him see all whites “through a film darkly”. John marries a Ghanaian lady, Sewah, after his return from London.

Rebecca, John's Ghanaian former lover before his sojourn to London, still loves him and feels betrayed that John returns from London and marries another Ghanaian. In their last encounter in John's house, Rebecca reveals John's former engagement to a white lady and the reason why he hates whites is revealed to John's wife and his friend Addo. This revelation leads to altercations between them. Rebecca leaves John's house angry but she is involved in an accident on her way home and dies. When John hears this, he commits suicide. Though tragedy appears to be de Graft's aim in this play, the plot's realization of the racial tension, including the denouement is somewhat melodramatic.

Ngugi's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is a political and historical play which falls within the class of Africa's history and protest plays. The play focuses on the era of Mau Mau struggle for independence in Kenya and reflects the events surrounding the arrest, trial and execution of Kimathi who was one of the key Kenyan freedom fighters in the colonial days. The play written after Kenya's independence reawakens nationalist consciousness, especially as the black rulers who replaced the white colonialists have fallen short of the masses' expectations. They have perpetuated corruption, social inequality, oppression of the poor and have failed to translate earlier nationalist visions into endearing and progressive reality. According to D. Salituma Wamalwa, Kimathi's “role as hero is not the superman image of much Western literature”, but he is presented as “one of the masses who is thrust into spotlight by events, enabling him to articulate peasant-worker alienation” and that from this, “an ideology and critique of society emerges” (17). Ngugi and Ngugi wa



Mirii's play, *I Will Marry When I Want*, depicts the plight of the peasant workers in the neo-colonial Kenya. The play underscores some of the reasons for mass disillusionment in post-independence Africa depicted as the collaboration of the rich, the church and other powerful elements of the State to manipulate and deprive and coerce the underprivileged masses of their rights to their lands and resources in order to put them under perpetual servitude. This is the situation of Kiguunda, the play's protagonist, who loses his one and a half acres of land to Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and Company. As Kiguunda refuses to sell his land, Ahab tricks him into demanding for a loan that will be difficult for him to pay. He loses all at last. The overriding themes of class oppression and class struggle are pervasive in the play. The same neo-colonial theme is extended to Ngugi and Mirii's *Mother Sing for Me* except that it is women that are relegated. And they fight for their emancipation and for other oppressed Kenyans. Three of the Tanzanian Ebrahim Hussein's plays *Kinjeketile*, *Mashetani* and *Arusi* use the Brechtian epic form to present different ideological perspectives to comment on the political history and social lives of his Tanzanian society. *Kinjeketile* recreates the historic Maji-Maji war against European colonialism in the struggle for Tanzanian independence. According to Alain Ricard, the play clearly answered their former President's (Julius Nyerere's) "appeal for artists to place their talent at the service of the state" (176). Only *Kinjeketile* has an English language version. *Mashetani* and *Arusi* and Hussein's other plays are in Kiswahili language.

Tawfik Al-Hakim is possibly the only North African Arab playwright who has been translated into English (Omotosho 99). Despite the fact that he was the first North African "Arab playwright to use Qur'ānic material as a basis for serious drama" (Paul Starkey 138), his philosophical themes are well known. His dramaturgy is greatly influenced by the Italian Pirandello's existentialist style and the European symbolists. The first of his plays to be published is *The Cave Dwellers* or *Sleepers in the Cave*, but "not in fact the first to be written" (Starkey 136). The play is known in Arabic as *Ahl al-Kahf* and published in 1933. The play was what al-Hakim called Egyptian tragedy which, he said, is different from the Greek model of Western tragedy because Greek tragedy represents man's struggle against fate, while the truly Egyptian tragedy represents man's struggle against time (M.M. Badawi 956). The play takes its plot from the Christian legend of the seven sleepers of Ephesus which is also a story in Sūra 18 of the Qur'ān. Instead of seven sleepers, they are only three in al-Hakim's play. They are Marnush, Mishlinya and Yamlikha, the shepherd. The first two were ministers in the former Emperor's empire. In the past of the play, the sleepers ran away and hid themselves in the cave and slept off because they were afraid of persecution by the former emperor only for them to wake up three hundred years later as the play begins.



As they wake up in the play's present time, the sleepers notice some similarities: the present king bears the same name with the old king of their time and his beautiful daughter bears the same name with the former king's daughter, who incidentally was the lover of one of the sleepers. Though the risen trio is revered as saints, they discover it is not possible for them to adapt to the new ways. They return back to the cave to continue their sleep for eternity. Among its popular themes is the hopelessness of man's struggle against time, a theme which al-Hakim "contrives to relate to his romantic nationalistic idea of an unchanging corpus of distinctively Egyptian thought which has resisted all invaders" (Starkey 137).

The play also examines the relationship between dream and reality. It shows that where "intellect and common sense inevitably fail in trying to resist the movement of time, only love and the heart can triumph over it" (Badawi 956). The theme of another play of al-Hakim, *Fate of a Cockroach*, which was published in 1966, is man's inability to control his fate/destiny. Man's failed quest to control his fate/destiny is what sometimes leads him to destruction or permanent misery like the fate of the cockroach King, and later Adil (a human character) in the last scene of the play; they are both overwhelmed by their quests. The play's use of disunited cockroaches as characters which reflects in its title and the diminutive but united ants, indicate a probable political satire and allegory which may be indicting the situations in his Arab world of the 1960s, and which had a common enemy in Israel with whom Arab nations fought a war and were defeated. The allegory may also be ridiculing the Egyptian society and its government at the time the play was written. The brilliance of the two prominent characters, the queen Cockroach and Samia (the wife of Adil) in the play and their deep, rounded and intelligent character dispositions as opposed to the mental weaknesses and irresponsibility of their husbands, tend to support feminist yearning for equality.

Lewis Nkosi's *Rhythm of Violence* written in 1964, for instance, deals with the theme of racial hatred and tension. But the characters from different South African races in the play feel the racial tension as some express a disapproval of violence as the means of seeking redress, while some argue in favour of it. There are rumours of imminent bombings, explosions are heard, and there is an actual bomb detonation planted in the City Hall by the anti-apartheid black students, killing both black and white victims. One of the major black characters, Tula is killed because he tries to rescue his white girlfriend's father. The bombing which is the culmination of the anti-apartheid plot in act two is a failed attempt because the two white policemen who are agents of the white repressive government survive it ironically. The play ends with suggestions that the black student agitators are going to be caught. The play adopts the expressionistic dramatic mode; it is highly symbolic using dream-like sequences with trance-like rhythmic movements to foreground mood and tempo necessitated by the pervasive tension. The music, symbolic images and metaphors in



the play interact to “create an artistic expression of the human condition in South Africa” (McCartney 268).

In a quite different experimental theatrical idiom from Nkosi's, Fugard in collaboration with John Nkani and Winston Ntshona, developed the plot of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* that gave rise to the play's production script and subsequent publication in 1972. The play is considered by some critics to be his best to date (Muronda 80). In the play, Fugard uses compressionist technique relying mostly on mime, dialogue, bare props, and flashbacks to tell the story of the dehumanizing conditions under which the blacks were subjected on their soil in the Apartheid South Africa. Through a retrospective dramatic technique presented from Styles' and Sizwe's experiences, two of the three characters in the play, the stories of the emotional trauma and man's inhumanity to another man created by apartheid structures against black South Africans in their land are told. From the dramatic action, Styles left his former job at the white man's car assemblage factory to establish his photographic studio from his meagre savings in order to retain his humanity and for personal fulfilment. Sizwe has to adopt the name of a dead man named Robert Zwelinzima and the deceased's work permit and abandon his own identity and name in order for his personal and family survival. By taking up the name, he dies as Sizwe Bansi and resurrects as Robert Zwelinzima. Sizwe Bansi, now Robert Zwelizinma, comes to Styles' studio where he shares a building with a funeral parlour also highly patronized. For the black Africans in the Apartheid South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, living was as frequent as dying.

Majority of the plays by Athol Fugard and Lewis Nkosi written during Apartheid South Africa of their birth can be grouped under drama with protest themes, because they were statements made against racial segregation (popularly known as apartheid) and its attendant evils. The situation then was such that, South Africa exuded so much hostility between the black and white races and the literary work which came from there had to reflect that reality for the work to be of any significant and social value to its author. Even after the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, the strength of the artistic vision in all the genres of written literature from that region seems to have waned or less assertive than it was during the period of apartheid. Playwrights' protest or apartheid themed plays remain some of the best plays to have come from Africa in terms of innovative and compelling dramatic idioms. Those plays will also remain a significant part of African written literary culture.

## Conclusion

The thematic and formal categorizations of modern African drama or African literature in general, will always be an inexhaustible task. It will always require regular reviews and revisions because African written dramaturgical traditions have



embodied wide varieties of experiences and cultural evolutions. However, such efforts here have the potentials of updating and refreshing knowledge on the growth of the African literary tradition. It also serves as a useful reference for readers and scholars to reflect on the dynamics and impact of the literary tradition on the African society in comparison to other continental literary cultures. The critical efforts of classifying written African drama based on themes and formal features by a few critics in the past are commendable but have narrowed the scope and attainments of the literary tradition, hence the need for scholars to pay a little more attention to this area of scholarship in order to properly assess its impact on society as a functional source of narrative knowledge. In this regard the works of contemporary playwrights such as Yerima, Idegu, Effiong, Akinsipe, Praise, Wekpe and other emerging writers that captures burning contemporary issues should open a new vision and perspective for critical discourse in African drama.

#### Works Cited

- Adetugbo, Abiodun. "Form and Style". *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*. Ed. Bruce King. University of Lagos and Evans Brothers, 1971, pp. 173-192.
- Badawi, M. M. "A Passion for Experimentation: The Novels and Plays of Tawfiq al-Hakim." *Third World Quarterly* 10, 2 Islam and Politics (April., 1988), pp. 949-960.
- Dasylva, Ademola O. *Studies in Drama*. Stirling Horden, 1977.
- Izevbaye, Dan S. "The Poetry and Drama of John Pepper Clark". *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*. Ed. Bruce King. University of Lagos and Evans Brothers, 1971. Pp. 152-172.
- Mcartney, Barney C. "Dramaturgical Movement in Lewis Nkosi's The Rhythm of Violence". *Negro American Literature Forum* vol.8, no. 4 (Winter 1974), pp. 268-270. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Aug. 2017.
- Mcdowell, Robert E. "African Drama, West and South". *Africa Today* 15,4 *Realism and Romanticism in African Literature* (Aug. - Sep. 1968) pp. 25-28.



- Muronda, Elfigio Freeborn. "Drama in the Political Struggle of South Africa". *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* vol. 12, no. 2, 1983, pp. 78-92.
- Ogunba, Oyin. "Modern Drama in West Africa". *Perspectives on African Literature*. Ed. Christopher Heywood. Heinemann, 1971.
- Ojaide, Tanure. "Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity". *African Studies Review* vol. 35, no. 3, Dec. 1992, pp. 43-57.
- Omotoso, Kole. Arabic Drama and Islamic Belief-System in Egypt. African Literature Today. 8 *Drama in Africa*, Heinemann and Africana, 1981, pp. 199-105.
- Ricard, Alain. "Ebrahim's Predicament". *Research in African Literatures* 23, 1 *The Language Question*. Spring 1992, pp. 175-178. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Aug. 2017.
- Rotimi, Ola. "African Dramatic Literature: To Be or To Become". An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Port Harcourt June 26, 1991. PDF. Web. 21 Aug. 2017.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Death and the King's Horseman*. Eyre Methuen, 1975.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge UP, 1976.
- Starkey, Paul. "Philosophical Themes in Tawfik Al-Hakim's Drama". *Journal of Arabic Literature* 8, 1977, pp. 136-152. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Aug. 2017.
- Ukala, Sam. "Politics of Aesthetics". *African Playwrights and Politics*. Eds. Martin Banham, James Gibbs and Femi Osofisan. James Currey, 2001, pp. 29-41.
- Wamalwa, D. Salituma. "The Engaged Artist: The Social Vision of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o". *Africa Today*. 33, 1 *Literature and Liberation*, 1<sup>st</sup> Qtr 1986, pp. 9-18. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Aug. 2017.



Wästberg, Per. "Themes in African Literature Today". *Daedalus* 103,2 *Slavery, Colonialism, and Racism*. Spring, 1974, pp. 135-150. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Aug. 2017.

Wuthier, Claude. *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*. Heinemann, 1978.

**Dr. Kingsley I. Ehiemua** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Faculty of Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State. He holds a PhD in English. He teaches Modern African Drama, Modern European Drama, Drama of Blacks in Diaspora, Dramatic Criticism and Film Criticism. Email: [ehiemuakingsley@yahoo.com](mailto:ehiemuakingsley@yahoo.com)