

Symbolism in the drama of JP Clark and Femi Osofisan

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation of literary texts in African drama has become a hazardous task for many readers (especially non-African readers). It is often difficult to go beyond the superficial literal meanings of a text. Readers often take what characters say as what they mean and do and, unfortunately, most dramatists do not usually provide explanatory notes at the end of such texts to aid the readers' understanding. Hence, the aim of this article is to embark on an analysis of the works of John Pepper Clark and Femi Osofisan (both Nigerian dramatists) to see how they have used symbolism in their plays *The Raft* and *Another Raft* respectively to convey meanings other than the surface textual meanings to the readers while trying to reflect the socio-political situation in Nigeria after independence. This will be discussed with a view to enlightening the readers on African dramatic texts about what symbols stand for in African drama, such that when reading African plays, readers will be in a position to appreciate and understand such texts better.

Introduction

One of the enduring characteristics of drama is its ability to adjust to changes in society. Society is forever in flux on account of several forces which either pull or push. The dynamism of every society is a function of these forces which may either be positive or negative in their orientation. The whirlpool of issues in society often constitutes its own reality. The ever-present fertile reality is like a huge catalyst which fires the imagination of the dramatist. As is known, it is the duty of drama to reflect reality. Like society that is forever evolving, stagnation is an anathema to drama, for it is a living thing that strenuously attempts to catch the irregular rhythm of life; its main constituency.

The African continent has been bedevilled by myriads of cultural and socio-political problems. With the attainment of independence by many African countries, from the late fifties to the early sixties, the perspective or vision of the African dramatists soon started changing. The euphoria of independence was to say the least, heady. Optimism was like sweet lavender in the air. The people's expectations were high.

However, the euphoria of political independence did not last long. For, as the African

politicians who took over the reins of governance started abusing their mandate through corruption and outright manipulation of government machinery for their selfish ends, the people's optimism soon changed to undiluted pessimism and disillusionment (Ogbeide 2013). As the people's expectations were dashed on the marble of the new politicians' greed and megalomania, a few of them began to ask what had gone wrong immediately after the much-awaited independence. In the face of this challenge, the African dramatists had to abandon their preoccupation with the works of colonial experience or 'the narcissistic phase (Soyinka, 1966: 53) in order to creatively engage the new reality. This second phase of the African drama which is marked by social criticism is referred to as 'the new realism' by Abiola Irele (1981:70). Some of the notable dramatists that featured prominently during this period were Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, John Pepper Clark and Femi Osofisan.

As clarified by Ogbeide (2013:159), this 'new realism'

... is a process by which the African writer has
 began to modify his stance and to adjust his angle
 of perception to take account of those political
 and social realities that began in the wake of
 African independence to impress themselves
 more closely upon the general attention through
 the entire continent. This is a development that
 stands in marked contrast to the earlier romanticism
 which was employed to affirm and to celebrate
 a specially-projected sense of uniqueness
 and which began to lose its point
 and a more rounded, more realistic awareness
 of human experience than was permissible
 in an earlier phase of our modern endeavor.

Conceptual clarification

Symbolism

The *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (2004:979) defines 'symbolism' as;
 The use of symbol in art, literature, films etc; to represent ideas

... It attempts to express states of the mind rather than represent reality, using the power of words and images to produce ideas and imagination.

From this definition, one can deduce that symbolism is applied by writers to express their state of mind as regards certain bad practices and ideas in the society. These ideas are meant to create a lasting impression on the minds of the readers.

The *New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* (2008:1476) states that the word 'symbol', from which symbolism is derived, is

... a mark, token or sign that represents something else ... In principle, anything can symbolise something else either temporarily or permanently especially concrete or material, used to represent something abstract or non-material, if an association can be formed between them.

Abrams (1985:184) states that 'a symbol in the broadest sense, is equivalent to a sign, that is, anything which signifies something else in this sense, all words are symbols'.

In African drama, writers make use of a variety of symbols and images to drive home their point. Most of these symbols are adapted from their indigenous languages and cultures, which may be familiar to African readers but which makes the understanding of such works complex for non-African readers. This is why Kalu Uka (1999:53) says that 'African literature presents difficulties to both African and non-African readers. The latter, if they lack an adequate knowledge of the African background, miss the significance of essential symbols and ideas'.

Symbolism can therefore be applied for various reasons; to satirise, to educate or to prod members of a society to take appropriate action on certain pertinent issues affecting the society.

An analysis of *The Raft*

The Raft dramatises the destruction of four lumbermen: Ogro, Olotu, Kengide and Ibobo. They are all on a raft that is adrift. Before they went to sleep, they secured the raft well but while sleeping part of the raft became detached from the rest of the logs. They soon discovered that they were adrift and in danger. Instead of desperately seeking safety, they indulged in unnecessary buck-passing and abused one another. Eventually, Olotu was taken away by the whirlwind. At the sight of a ship, Ogro jumped into the water but the people in the ship thought he was a sea monster so they threw pebbles at him. The other two, Kengide and Ibobo, started shouting for help in the night, into the fog and over the water. They were later enveloped by the fog and they could not get to their destination. The destruction of all the men on board was total, since none escaped.

It becomes clear that, thematically speaking, the drama is a celebration of fatalism and pessimism since it symbolically projects the annihilation of humanity. Pessimism and cynicism spring from reactionary ideology. In spite of the play's foregrounding of wretches as victims of their socio-cultural and economic environment, the characters are shaped so as to face their present dilemma with stark cynicism which betrays a complete lack

of commitment on their part. Total alienation is what defines these characters. Kengide, especially, who is the domineering figure among them, is an embodiment of this trait. His defence of corruption within Nigeria, his country, as a free-for-all exemplifies this. His reference to businessmen, forest officers and the police as all being rogues within this corrupt society forms part of this cynicism (pp. 120--121)

The entire dramatic situation within which the characters find themselves is so fatalistically shaped that their annihilation is inevitable. Olotu, for instance, heads for his own painful death when the raft breaks into two, leaving him alone on the few logs. He cannot swim and is also too inexperienced to understand that he ought to lower the sail for the purpose of reducing the speed of his own portion of the raft. The event does not even give him a chance of hearing the hysterical shouts of Ibobo.

Ibobo:

Lower the sail, Olotu!
 Lower the sail! Oh, the wind
 Is too loud,
 But don't they teach these
 People anything practical at
 school? (p. 112)

Even Ogro, who is a consummate swimmer, does not escape death. He swims in his protracted attempt to get on board the ship which belongs to the Niger company. But since the drama is built on the ideology of fatalism and doom, he is prevented from getting safely on board by the ship's crew and he also dies an agonising death.

The theatrical imagery and symbols which the drama employs to its advantage also point unambiguously to its fatalistic intent. The ubiquitous presence of sharks, starfish, snakes and other animals of prey that populate the water on which the raft is adrift leaves no room for escape. Finally, the impenetrable fog that engulfs Burutu and her surroundings completes the tragic cycle.

The use of symbolism in *The Raft*

Uka (1999:75) states that JP Clark is a playwright who

... merges the elements of his western philosophy to that of his African traditions to give an outstanding kind of drama. He explores various themes and ideas in his work. These are political, religious, social and economic issues that affect the lives of the people in his society. He therefore presents these ideas with the use of symbols. These symbols and imageries which are peculiar occur in the daily conversation of his Urhobo and Izon people of the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria.

The Raft can be interpreted as the political status of Nigerian society after independence. In terms of this interpretation, the four lumbermen symbolise the four regions of Nigeria

at that time. All the premiers of the four regions have lost control; they have gone adrift. The play can be described as a prophetic one because the playwright envisions doom and what he predicted actually came to pass in Nigeria after independence. Nigeria's unity was not conclusive then. There was the tendency for parts of the country to want to secede. The playwright presents *The Raft* as representing the problems of Nigeria in the symbolic regional characters of Ogro, Ibobo, Kengide and Olotu. They are impotent, incompetent and visionless. They symbolise the Nigerian nation whose problems are being compounded by the greedy and selfish rulers. The Niger-Delta situation of crude oil damaging the crops and farmland and allowing the masses to starve is staring the government in the face. The government turns deaf ears to those issues without proffering any solution. This is illustrated in Kengide's speech:

Kengide:

What a fool! The old chiefs who would hand out the best of their daughters like that died out generation ago. Nowadays, they drain the delta of all that is in it and not a shrimp slips past their fat fingers (p. 106).

Uka (1999:94) states that *The Raft* can equally be interpreted from an existentialist point of view. The *Oxford Advanced Dictionary* (2006:404) defines existentialism as 'a philosophy that arises from the inability of man to explain the world around him. Human beings are responsible for their actions'.

The raft represents the uncomfortable and uncertain world that is full of strains and stresses. Man is therefore doomed from the outset and is therefore left to drift to inevitable destruction. In other words, man is a unique being living in a hostile environment. The theory of existentialism further states that man's life is one vast sea of sorrow with 'cataracts of joy', that is, lots of sorrow but little joy.

Moreover, the setting of the play is in a creek in the Niger-Delta. The characters are in an aquatic environment in the play:

Ogro: And we are water-logged in Osikoboro, the confluence of all Creeks!

Olotu: The drain pit of all earth

Kengide: With the swift ebb tide coming

Ibobo: It calls for careful navigation

Olotu: What to swing from one tide to another? (p. 104)

This explains the condition of man in the universe. Elements of nature which are supposed to be soothing and therapeutic, and also to serve as a source of hope and refreshment to man are presented as cruel and wicked. This suggests that nature is in contrast with what it should be to man.

Furthermore, the first part of the play is subtitled 'Tide wash'. Literally, 'tide' refers to the rise and fall in the level of the sea, but here it is not a regular rise but a regular fall that washes away. 'Tide wash' can be interpreted as the very unpleasant conditions the

crew are bound to face in the course of the journey. This is reminiscent of the unpleasant policies that Nigerians have been subjected to. The tide wash – or the pain – keeps on increasing and the nation becomes more difficult to govern. The physical and psychological conditions of the people keep on declining. The crew symbolises Nigerians' hopes for a successful journey but success is far from being achieved. The difficulty in achieving success is represented by the symbol of 'tide wash'. The crew foresees imminent doom as their journey progresses.

Olotu: It is not stories about sinews of strength we are after. How is it we have gone adrift like this? ...it was unwise tethering the raft with loops of reeds...

Kengide: I simply explained that in rivers with muddy floors and swampy banks like this one, it is not always safe to make boats fast to a post, worst of all, a raft. To an arm of the trees huddling close to the waters perhaps, but the danger there is the possible visits from snakes and monkeys or worse (pp. 93–94).

This explains the delicate state of Nigeria which had gained her independence only four years before the play was written. The paradox of suffering amidst plenty, the way the country's material and human resources were being depleted by the materialistic ruling class and how indifferent the ruling class were to the sufferings of the masses are vividly illustrated.

The symbol of 'river' is a universal one. A river is supposed to be a source from which good things flow and it is supposed to wash or flush away any unwanted material. We are made to understand in the play that the condition of Nigeria can be likened to a 'river with muddy floors and swamp' (p. 94).

The 'wind' is another symbolic image in this play. Literally, wind can be described as air that moves quickly as a result of natural forces. In the second part of this play, we come across the subtitle 'wind lash'. The portion of the raft breaks off with one character on it. The wind is too loud and Olotu, who is inexperienced, is carried away by the whirlwind. He could not help himself, so he is completely swept away by the lashes of the wind. The wind lashes out fiercely at the characters and none of them reach their destination since Ogro jumped into the water at the sight of a ship. However, he was mistaken for a sea monster and the people in the ship threw pebbles at him while the other two characters Ibobo and Kengide were covered by the fog.

The Nigerian nation is being blown here and there by the social, economic and political whirlwind and its boat is at the point of hitting the rock. The so-called technocrats and experts watch helplessly as the nation goes adrift. None of the economic and political solutions proffered by the leaders has worked. Corruption, terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery and all other social vices are on the increase. These are the warnings which JP Clark seems to be giving in this play and they have all come to pass since independence.

An analysis of *Another Raft*

Generally, the distinctive feature of Femi Osofisan's drama is its conscious penchant for consistently presenting a vivid ideological front against reactionary, retrogressive aesthetics. Specifically, his *No more The Wasted Breed* is unmistakably an ideologico-aesthetic reaction to Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*. Similarly, Osofisan's *Another Raft* presents an ideologico-aesthetic alternative to JP Clark's culinary drama, *The Raft*.

Employing the metaphor of mythico-ritual cleansing via the epic dramaturgic form, the play analytically reveals the objective socioeconomic and political causes that set the raft with all its occupants adrift. The main dramatic element that achieves this is character and characterisation just like Clark's *The Raft*. The theme of socio-political and economic turmoil assumes a special historical analysis in this play unlike in Clark's drama. It attempts to proffer reasons why its society is adrift and identifies rampant corruption as the ubiquitous syndrome that torments society. This syndrome is shown to be predicated on individualism.

In its use of the historical-materialist method to account for the drift situation of its fictive world, *Another Raft* goes further to bring us to the realisation that the exploiters and oppressors themselves are at war with each other mainly as a result of their cut-throat individualism. The weird idea of human sacrifice which initiates the entire action of this drama, for example, is shown to be motivated by a political and economic vendetta which is merely subverted by the spirit of cultural and religious revivalism. This ritual voyage has in fact been stage-managed by Lanusen for the sole purpose of assassinating his rival, Ekuroola. Ironically, Agunrin, the soldier he has hired for his criminal business becomes the dictator on the raft. It is this hired assassin that is disguised as a female carrier. We realise that it is Agunrin who has secretly cut the mooring and deliberately set the raft adrift. He bluntly tells Lanusen as he surprisingly usurps power with his heavily loaded gun:

Agunrin: Prince, your game is over and there is nowhere to run. You don't hire a soldier to kill for you and you expect he won't know how to defend himself (pp. 55–56)

With particular reference to Nigeria – the home of this drama – this is unquestionably a profound theatrical statement that reveals, at least in part, the germ of our politico-economic and social predicament. Its simplicity becomes even stronger during Agunrin's torture of the oppressive/exploitative gang including Orousi who manipulates his privileged position as the chief priest of Ifa to nurture fraud and exploitation (p. 59).

It is worthy of note that the drama does not exonerate the military from the implied crimes of this debased society which the drama takes time to show to be all manmade. Rather, the messianic stance that the military rulers assume encounters castigation. While Agunrin continues to torture and insists on repentance before he decides on what to do with the lives of the looters, Gbebe reminds this 'Saint; ... but you know, don't you, that you are just as guilty as those you condemn? (p. 63). Agunrin's silence, his inability to respond to this question, has great dramatic significance. His offence conveys to us the fact that he is equally, if not more, guilty.

It will be recalled that the characters in *The Raft* belong exclusively to the downtrodden class and that such characters are forged mainly from the point of view of fatalism and cynicism. *Another Raft* on the other hand, moulds its characters along class lines. In this respect, we are made to understand that the principal architects of the adrift situation are those that belongs to the ruling class, like Lanusen, who is a prince and a local council chairman, and Ekuroola (chief priest of rituals). Their official brigandage is responsible for the death and untold suffering in the land which they inflict through various machinations (pp. 21–22).

It is observed that despite the fact that *Another Raft* creates abundant tragic signals, including feverous storms, lightning and thunder, as well as the conspicuous presence of snakes and sharks (a situation which is very similar to that of *The Raft*), it manipulates such potentially disastrous signals to suit its optimistic vision. We cannot thus deny the fact that many have lost their lives in this drama just like in *The Raft*. But the fact remains that deaths are prevented in keeping with the play's ideologico-political romanticism. Here too, the raft breaks into two to signify disintegration. Nevertheless, instead of the cynicism and ambivalence that characterise *The Raft*, there is a grave sense of collective destiny among the suffering characters in *Another Raft*, partly as a result of their collective guilt. This has great significance for the play's optimistic resolution, in that towards the end of the play, instead of persistent tragic incidents that engulf the characters in the *The Raft* like the fog of Burutu, the moon provides light and there is plenty of fish on board.

The use of symbolism in *Another Raft*

In *Another Raft*, Osofisan presents a people plagued by floods and other natural disasters. The flood as an agent of destruction represents the Nigerian leaders who instead of speaking the truth struggle to gain supremacy over the peasants. This is illustrated in Lanusen's speech:

Lanusen: Look at the floods Agunrin! Just look at the floods and the tragedies they are causing everywhere! The town will blame us as before. Just because the truth cannot be told! Just because no one has the guts to point a finger where it should be pointed; at Ekuroola (p. 57).

The flood of military regimes in Nigeria is more destructive than the civilian regimes that they accused of inefficiency, incompetence and ineptitude. Osofisan foresees that all these will lead the nation to further doom.

The strife for power and the struggle for leadership are disadvantageous to the growth of the nation since the struggle is intended to fulfil the leaders' selfish ambitions. The government functionaries feed on the sweat of the oppressed masses to line their pockets. This is illustrated by Agunrin and Reore. Agunrin qualifies the government with the word 'sharks' while Reore describes the masses as 'the fish'.

Agunrin (furious): Nonsense! What is the matter with you? As if you don't hear them! Sharks! They are nothing but sharks!

Reore: And we the fish they love to feed on! (p. 46).

The crisis on the increment in the price of petroleum products in Nigeria is akin to this. The politicians in government are not remitting the funds to government coffers. They spend government money lavishly and thoughtlessly to the detriment of the masses that are going through difficulties. This makes the masses the fish which they devour.

Lanusen hires Agunrin to eliminate Ekuroola, the Lagos business tycoon, who is also the Abore (the chief priest), but Agunrin is a military man, who disguises himself as the carrier (the sacrificial lamb). He seizes the opportunity to take over power because to him, 'life is a war we all fight to win, whatever the weapon' (p. 58). This is the exact corollary of the way a general overthrew a civilian regime (an interim government) ostensibly to salvage Nigeria from collapse. Each regime struggles in its own way to gain acceptability and influence, to subdue the poor masses they are supposed to be serving. The masses are puppets to be tossed here and there. The Ifa priest is summoned at the height of the floods and he suggests that the ancient rites of collective cleansing must be revived (p. 6). This is to avert more disaster. At the end, only Oge, Orousi and Reore, who represent the just, survive. All the others are destroyed by the flood.

The sea is also symbolic in the play. It is as Gbebe rightly observes; 'the sea of the history ... in its belly are numerous kinds of meat. It carries salt, it carries sharks, it carries other fishes (p. 69).

'Raft' is another symbolic image that Osofisan uses to represent the condition of the Nigerian society. The play is set in the lagoon. We learn that the crew set out on the journey on a boat but the boat had to be abandoned for a raft. In the same vein, the boat of the nation after independence seems to be fragile for the journey, so the people decide to abandon it for the raft that is equally risky. The nation abandoned the parliamentary system of government for the presidential system which did not last long. It also embraced military rule immediately after it made its incursion into politics. The rescue mission of the military later became a mirage. Gbilekaa (1997:41) says of the situation:

The relevance and expectation of the cleansing team on the goddess to rescue the ill-fated raft does not materialize. Eventually, the gods are demystified and they come down as human beings by removing their costumes. Together, with the cleansing team, they row and push the raft in unison.

Osofisan proposes a way out of the doldrums in which the nation finds itself. He opines that the nation can only be revived through collective and determined efforts (Sovereign National Conference) and not by any supernatural forces. This is where he preaches veiled revolution as the solution. He presents the character of Yemosa, the sea goddess, as a mere phantom figure to show that what man constructs as gods are unnecessary for the growth of the nation, the much-dreaded military is, after all, fallible. As the sea goddess is demystified in the play, so is the military demystified.

Symbolically, the leadership of Nigeria is further doomed since the leaders are not helping matters. The canker of corruption has eaten deep into them. The steering poles and the paddles that are missing from the boat can symbolise the loss of values, culture, economic and human resources and political stability in the country, and so the chances of regaining these missing values are slim, as are the chances of finding the steering poles in the

sea. So, most Nigerians have accepted these irregularities and abnormal conditions in the country as their fate. This is exemplified in Gbebe's speech:

Gbebe: That's what I mean! It is our destiny. We of this continent we are like a raft lost in the stream of history, bound for an Island of pain. We can scream all we want, sing our complaints to the air, but we cannot leave the raft. We are doomed for ever to be the slaves of conquerors. Yes! That is why our ancestor s chose Yemosa as the totem of the land, because they know she is the goddess of shipwrecks (p. 45).

'Water' is also a symbolic element in the play. Water is supposed to be a revitalising and cleansing agent. Water is a type of refreshment for humans but Osofisan uses water as an agent of destruction. The people discover that they are adrift as Oge exclaims to Reore:

Oge: we are adrift

Reore: (looking) water! Nothing but water

Lanusen: Water! All I see is water (p. 17).

Here, 'water' which is expected to give life ironically represents destruction. The Nigerian leaders who are supposed to protect their people by giving them life and hope are the very ones snuffing lives out due to their uncaring, nonchalant and selfish attitude towards the needs of the people.

Conclusion

Over the years, drama has been a tool that writers use as a weapon to fight the evils in the society. Since drama reflects the culture of the people, most works of African writers are characterised by the use of images and symbols which are often from their indigenous culture and language. This has a way of enhancing the beauty of art and the didactic functions of such works.

John Pepper Clark and Femi Osofisan are prolific writers whose works are identified with the everyday use of symbols. They present many of their ideologies and thematic concerns within the deep-rooted social and political frameworks that are prevalent in society. They deal with various issues ranging from class consciousness, materialism, moral decadence, religious hypocrisy, and the mismanagement and misappropriation of public funds which seem to be eating deep into the fabric of society. They often present these ideas and ideals with symbols. At other times, they juxtapose the various symbols to give their works a unique style.

The convergence of the visions and missions of both Clark and Osofisan, their use of topical symbols and their veiled messages are all delicious food for thought for readers of their texts. The topicality of their messages, which are often universal, makes them food for thought for the government of any nation by warning them about the need for good governance.

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