

MONODRAMA AND THE NARRATOLOGY OF ORAL AFRICAN CULTURE: A STUDY OF MBAJIORGU AND BINEBAI

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Abstract

The word drama and most importantly its sub-genre called solo drama seem to be dominated by written text only. But the more solo drama in Africa showcases itself in the forms of written text, the more the oral narratology of African culture reveals itself in solo drama. The solo drama we mean here is not stand-up comedy, performance poetry and monologue in poetry which many people think are the same as solo drama. This research made attempt to study solo drama especially its language that serves as the distinguishing feature in form of narration that is heavily influenced by the oral tales of African culture that “oscillates between poetry and prose” as evident in Mbajiorgu and Binebai. This one-man theatre or solo drama orientation of only one person performing all the roles in the play and still achieves believability in the minds of the audience, promotes mobility of art and also reveals human conditions. Yet, monodrama relies much on language that operates in-between “poetry and prose” to achieve its aims as against the usual multiple characters playing specific role which tends to encourage waste of resources and its language of terseness which the usual drama is known for.

Introduction

Monodrama is said to be a fictional story about life told on stage by only one person who embodies all other characters before an audience. The above made scholars like Patris Parvis in his *Dictionary of Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* to argue that solo drama is a “play with single character or at least a single actor who may take on several roles. And that such plays focus on one individual and explore his innermost motivations, subjectivity and lyricism...” The above statement by Parvis is as against the multiple characters tradition where group characters play different roles. It should be recalled that the origin of drama dates back in Greece during the thanks-giving ceremony of the Greek god, Dionysius around 6th century B.C. Emeka Nwabueze tells us that,

The genesis of dramatic art took place one day in the sixth century B.C. The major activity of the vintage season was to assemble to give thanks to the god, Dionysus... In the middle of this presentation of activity one of the chorus members mounted the altar stone assumed the role of the god about whose activities the chorus had assembled to recount. Stepping out of himself and assuming a character... this sole actor impersonated and imitated the hero instead of singing about him... the man who performed this historic act was Thespis, the Greek artist credited with the discovery of drama... the first actor... the first writer of tragedy. (11-12)

It is amazing how drama with its documented origin in solo dramatic art has been neglected and overtaken by multi –cast tradition as if solo theatre or performance never existed before. Therefore, this work studies monodrama and the tale -telling of African oral culture in Mbajiorgu and Binebai. That is to account for the existence of the peculiar language of solo drama that “oscillates between prose and poetry” that is heavily conditioned by the narratology of African /Nigerian oral tradition. Going by the Western concept of drama, as has been said elsewhere, it means that whatever forms the dithyramb must have taken before the Thespian imitation and impersonation remained non-drama, at the most, mere ritual. Greg Mbajiorgu argues on the origin of monodrama and then corroborates that,

As far as documented and published history is concerned, the origin of improvisatory solo is traceable to Thespis. That is the fact before us. There may have been pre-historic fore-runners but there is little or no evidence to substantiate such claims like that of Thespis of ancient Greece, documented in Aristotle’s *The Poetics*.(325)

In backing the argument above, Nwabueze further adds that,

Soon after this marvelous and innovative performance, other Greek artists began to imitate the performance aesthetics of this extraordinary artist (Thespis)... since then, this art has grown considerably, acquired different forms and has come to mean different things to different people .(12)

The researcher has maintained elsewhere too, that drama, having grown and acquired different forms including additional characters known today as multiple-character convention, has maintained strong holds in the world of drama and theatre for centuries. Nwabueze adds that it was not until 18th century that,

The earliest example of monodrama was created ... and it is entitled *Pygmalion* by a playwright named Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But we must note that it was at the beginning of the 20th century that great actors reduced multi-cast plays to the vision of one character ... (325)

In analyzing such statement, one notices that the above great actors’ act of reducing multi-cast plays to the vision of one character playing all the roles is nothing but a rediscovery of solo theatre that took place during the 20th century. The above, no doubts is in line with modernist philosophy/ Avant-garde / theatre of revolt which is an attempt to reclaim, assert and to overtake even the multi-cast tradition and then serve as a better drama alternative. The 20th century artist is said to have set out to collapse the prison wall imposed on arts by the old art tradition in order to be free to experiment and arrive at new order and make progress since life abhors stagnation. In the opinion stated above, it then means that it is the modernist thinking that brought about writers, artists and their art like Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Samuel Beckett, Jerzy Grotowsky, Bertolt Brecht, Funsho Alabi, Wole Soyinka, Esiaba Irobi, Greg Mbajiorgu, Benedict Binebai and so many others. No doubts, minimalism and “poor theatre practice” are conditioned by avant – garde thinking. Minimalism and the concept of “poor theatre” practice by Jerzy Grotowsky point towards same direction in drama and theatre. Grotowsky rejects the toga of “rich theatre” and opts for the cutting down “all non essential scenery, costumes, and props to create the so-called poor theatre where the only focus was the unadorned actor”.

Solo drama which is dependent on the concept of minimalism is indeed drama/ theatre of revolt- with the “forbidden styles and subject matters” like the one- man actor vision, including feminism that was never given attention until the modernist era. Robert Brustein in his modernist thinking reveals that,

Messianic revolt is the initial stage of the modern drama... it can be found in Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, and O’Neill... Messianic drama is a medium of absolute liberation, unrestrained by dramatic rules or human limitations, through which the rebel dramatist indulges his insatiable appetite for the infinite. (16-17)

It is in the spirit of theatre revolt that the concept of minimalism manipulates the theatrical props thereby trying to overtake multiple characters tradition in order to maintain its place as better-alternative in the world of dramatic art. Furthermore, solo drama encourages the creative power of the individual’s survival in the economic mess like ours and then stands as a handy/mobile means of campaign against injustice, impunity, corruption, squandering of public funds, child abuse, human trafficking and all forms of social vices. The Nigerian artists like Mbajiorgu and Binebai despite their long training in the Western technicalities of drama/theatre are still heavily influenced by their African oral/solo performance heritage .In all humanity, it is said that man spoke before he wrote. The above argument shows that whatever metamorphoses we find in the form of written solo drama of Mbajiorgu and Binebai has its roots in the African / Nigerian oral tradition like the Ozidi saga in Ijaw Kingdom and others with its peculiar tale -telling language structure instead of mere dialogue and terseness which drama is known for. Indeed, the said roots can be traced to the peculiar language of the oral narratives in traditional African setting like the folk tales, etc. Binebai tells us that, “I read some of J.P Clark’s plays like Ozidi...” (390) He further adds thus,

I tried to establish a pattern of solo drama tradition that has its roots in the Ijaw cultural background and other ethnic groups in the Niger- Delta. This tradition is drawn from the story telling tradition of the Ijaw people. Stories are told in Ijaw land to dance, music and mime yet the story teller does not enter into dialogue with those who sing and dance... (393)

Greg Mbajiorgu in an interview too granted to Austine Amanze Akpuda reveals that,

... I listened to folk tales told by my mother... my elder sister thrilled me with moonlight tales. ...I grew to love folk tales... All these experiences have no doubt contributed to my development as a solo performer... I came from Ihiaha in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State. In that part of Igbo land, we have notable minstrels like Seven (7-7) Promoter, and several others. (338).

It is this unique language that this research sets to showcase for better understanding The minimalist artwork like monodrama that is highly mobile in nature suggests that drama or its presentation can actually take place anywhere whether in the theatre or not. Grotowski attempts to answer the question; what is theatre which his answer falls in line with minimalist tradition thus,

can the theatre exist without costumes and sets? Yes, it can. Can it exist without music to accompany the plot? Yes, it can. Can it exist without lighting effects? Of course. And without a text? Yes; the history of the theatre confirms this. In the evolution of

the theatrical art, the text was one of the last elements to be added. (983)

However, Grotowski goes further to interrogate the definition of theatre when he asks, “but can the theatre exist without actors? I know of no example of this”. Again, he asks, can the theatre exist without an audience? At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance. All the other things are supplementary – perhaps necessary, but nevertheless, supplementary. (982)

In this reductionist approach where theatrical elements are minimized to the barest optimal where the actor and the audience are the most essential, then the whole task falls on the body of the actor to achieve a total theatre effects on the audience.

The Prime Minister's Son, My Life in the Burning Creeks and the Narratology of oral African setting

(A cemetery beside a local church. On stage is PRIME MINISTER'S SON in a completely tattered outfit dirging as he advanced towards his mother's tombstone.)

PRIME MINISTER'S SON: *(Dirging.)*

Keduz' Ife m g' erne? Uw'agwu go m' ike Keduz' Ife m g' erne?
Uw'agwu go m' ike Abum onye na-enwero onye ona-echekuwbe
Keduz' ife m g' erne? Uw' agwu go m' ike Keduz' ife m g' eme?
Uw' agwu go m' ike Keduz' ife m g' eme? Uw' agwu go m' ike What
shall I do? I am tired of life What shall I do?' I am tired of life I am one
who has no one to turn to What shall I do?(1-3)

PRIME MINISTER'S SON cries passionately as he stoops beside his mother's tombstone.}

As we are, so she was. As she is, so shall we be.

(Sits beside the tombstone) But why, mother? Why?

Why did you leave me this way? Now that you are gone,

what is the essence of my life? Come and take me along with you.

Mama, please come... (11-12)

In similar vein as a monodrama, we notice a drama presentation in the tradition of monopolylogue where only one character enjoys the patent rights of words in a flow of interaction with himself and where monologue, dialogue, drama and monodrama converge and then exhibit peculiarity thus,

(Dirging in tears as he turns, facing the audience.)

Keduz' ife m g' eme?

Uw' agwu go m' ike

Keduz' ife m g' eme?

Uw' agwu go m' ike

...

My friends, and countrymen, my sorrowful and melancholic tale goes beyond my tears of misery. For more than sixteen years, Ezinma, Emenike and I lived peacefully, a happy family, until last year... (5-8)

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as EZINMA: Sir, thank you very much.

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as PRIME MINISTER: You're welcome. What's your name?

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as EZINMA; Ezinma!

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as PRIME MINISTER: Ezinma,
you're very beautiful.

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as BLIND WOMAN: Thank you my son. May your days be long!

(12-14)

Here, we notice the language that is almost the same with the oral tales of African tradition like the prose narratives which Jasper Onuekwusi in *Fundamentals of African Oral Literature* tells us, "...are fairly long and are prosaic"(50). That is against the tenets of dialogue which drama is known for. For dialogue in drama or dramatic dialogue, Nwabueze maintains that, the word dialogue derives from the Greek word "to converse" This means that there ought to be at least two speakers for dramatic dialogue to thrive. Dramatic dialogue involves the exchange of speech between two characters, the thoughts of a single character; and conversation between several characters in a play (104)

The above is in contradiction with ventriloquism type of language which makes possible every monodrama and then points back to the narratology in oral tales in African milieu. Mbajiorju opines that, language in monodrama "oscillates between prose and poetry". And that such language is based purely on what is regarded as ventriloquism which enables the solo actor to achieve verisimilitude of those other characters which the lone actor embodies. In the background of *The Prime Minister's Son*, Mbajiorju argues that,

Ventriloquism is a well known mimetic technique that was used by the ancient Greek soloists for interpreting multiple roles. This vocal characterization technique required by the single actor who is interpreting multiple roles can only be appreciated in a performance and not in a text. (67)

In supporting the adequacy of this language form in monodrama, C.B Davis submits that, Masked actors, puppeteers, storytellers, monolinquists and other performers who signify multiple identities with the voice usually rely on systems of difference that reveal cultural codes for class, ethnicity, gender and socially typed personality of the speaker... (qtd in Mbajiorju, 67-68)

Davis is said to have identified two types of vocal modulation that are associated with ventriloquism which are vocal transformation and acoustic perspective thus,

Vocal transformation designates a change of voice that is in contrast either to the speaker's normal voice or other assumed or imitated voices, while acoustic perspective is the principle behind not only the voice-illusion or the distance ventriloquism but also the auditory signification of space and movement in a sign system (qtd in "background", 67-68).

It is believed that we can only appreciate the connection between voice and identity only in the circumstance of stage performance where the lone actor appropriates his voice and body in a bare space (Mbajiorju, 68). In the same vein, it is argued that the solo actor embodies the other characters on stage realistically by the use of what Charles Mathew calls monopolylogue which he sees as, "One man having the monopoly of words in a series of dialogue with himself". (qtd in "background", 67) The ventriloquism and monopolylogue in

monodrama that are “fairly long and prosaic” just like we have in oral tales in African culture are what we encounter when The Prime Minister's Son speaks as Emenike thus, PRIME MINISTER’S SON as EMENIKE:

Ozoemena was my best friend in the orphanage.

Throughout that week, this man, whom we called Master, treated us like princes. One Saturday morning, some strange faces visited our new home. Later that same day, Master went out with Ozoemene and that was the last time I set my eyes on Ozoemene. All my efforts to enquire about Ozoemena’s whereabouts from Master were dismissed with a wave of the hand. Out of curiosity, I asked people in the neighborhood whether they knew where Ozoemena could be, but each person I asked treated me like a dynamo. I sensed something fishy was happening in my new home. It wasn’t until I had a misunderstanding with one of the street boys that he, in a bid to spite me, told me that my occultist and cabalistic master would soon use me for sacrifice. The boy also wished I would rot in the shrine, but then, he had unwittingly unraveled the puzzle of Ozoemena’s disappearance. In my room that night, I kept eating Kola nuts to keep awake. By the dead hour of the night, when spirits are known to roam the surface of the earth, I stole out into the harsh harmattan air and wandered off with nothing but the dirty clothes on my body. I walked for two nights non-stop to another part of the town where I was sure the long hands of my master could not get me. (36-37)

Like The *Prime Minister’s Son* above, *My Life in the Burning Creeks* that is for our analysis was written by Binebai. Benedict Ebimotimi Binebai writes thus, (*At the public square in Gbaramatu in one of the creeks of the Niger Delta, a dirge ... a fairly tall black skinned youth of about thirty years comes out to the deserted public square. He is wearing a blue jean trousers and a faded T-shirt*):

PEREWARE:

What does life mean to you (Pointing to someone in the audience) Enjoyment? Does it mean the same thing to me?

The endowment of life is partial. Some people are born with silver spoon some have silver spoon entrusted unto them. And there are others born with silver spoon. But the gods deny them the right and privilege to feed with the silver spoon. If life is not partial, why is it fair to some people and foul to some others? Yes!...

(*Physical effects of fire flames*)

For many years my people stood against Subjugation. One day, three low flying helicopters came to my land and we all gave a wave of welcome as our kingdom was in a Festive mood... (56-58)

(*Faint sound of helicopters as Pereware waves briefly and stops short...*)

Oh! My God. What has come over me? I have started this story wrongly. Please bear with me. Let me start from where the creator of my story started it.

(A brief song to usher in the narration. The song continues in the background, fading progressively as Pereware speaks)

I graduated from one of Nigeria's prestigious universities and was posted to Kano for National Youth Service. My friend, Abubakar, from Sokoto State who read Islamic and Arabic Studies was posted to Delta, My own state, and was further posted to Chevron at Escravos where he served and was retained there at the Public and Corporate Affairs unit. I returned from Northern Nigeria after service without a job offer...(7)

PEREWARE: But Abubakar, how do I make it when I don't have a Godfather? I need the job, would you take me to a godfather who can offer me the job?

PEREWARE as ABUBAKAR: The bitter truth is that you need to become a Muslim and truly bear a Muslim name before the assistance can come

We experience the show of a blown ventriloquism and monopolylogue in monodrama that is conditioned by the fairly long and free flowing pattern in oral tales of African setting. The above is what we see when Pereware speaks as Wenetua reeling out the frustration of average Nigerian/Niger-Deltan thus,

PEREWARE as WENETUA: Every choice you make in the burning creeks points to futility and cruelty and sometimes self destruction. Becoming a fisherman is futile because oil has polluted the waters; what about the flora and fauna that have been deprived of their fertility? Your dream of having a job is killed by the monster of discrimination and oppression and to be in politics means fighting a war of violence against your will. Youths of the aquatic region take to diving dangerously into the depth of the river to collect water snails to eke a living even the choice of going into local crude oil refining is another suicidal venture. The effect of this local refinery can be devastating as its health implications hold no good future for our people. The quality of our unborn children in this burning and oil refining creeks will fail our future generation. In this burning creek, the traditional life support system has been destroyed by oil exploration. People now embrace all types of available economic means to keep the family going. These militants see the oppressors as people who want them to be quiet even in the face of economic and social injustice, resource theft, environmental degradation, and political exclusion. But while they have been using our oil to drive their cars, fuel their airplanes, and keep the wonderful wheels of our wealth whirling. Those of us in the burning creeks have had our land, lives, and dreams destroyed. ...So, what are you doing with that rope? You want to die because you have no job yet? You are a coward! You have a sick mother who has spent all her savings and used up her sweat to make you a man. And a university graduate. And you think because life has not

been fair to you, the best thing to do is to die to allow your mother wallow and die in sorrow and pains? (29-30)

In the above language structure, we notice a peculiar type where “fairly long and prosaic” language form just like the fairly long and free flowing pattern in oral tales in African culture is imposed on the monodrama especially that written by Africans like Mbajiorju and Binebai which they consciously set out to achieve.

Conclusion

So far, one notices that despite being trained in the Western technicalities in drama and consequently its sub-genre called monodrama, Greg Mbajiorju and Benedict Binebai create the first monodrama in Nigeria that appropriate the Igbo and Ijaw oral language form/ tales -telling heritage respectively. As one –man theatre, its root points back to the one-man oral performance in most human societies especially in Africa and her oral language pattern which now graduates into what is regarded as the pioneer monodrama and its peculiar language form in Nigeria today.

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