

CHAPTER NINE

FAMILIAR FLIPS, NEW ILLUSION AND CREATIVE SYMBIOSIS: THE PLAYWRIGHT, VIDEO TECHNOLOGY AND A GENERATION CHALLENGED

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INTRODUCTION

Suffice it to say that the Nigerian video, as a phenomenon, emerged towards the closing but visible chapters of the twentieth century, perhaps as a “late” response to the renaissance of cultural nationalism. Popular video films have thus become an important mode of apprehending reality and illusion in the new millennium. Jonathan Haynes describes them as “something between television and cinema, and (they) do not fit comfortably within the north American structure either” (2000:1).

Lanrele Bamidele has argued that the institutional approach to the sociology of literature presupposes an analysis of such institution as publishing, distribution, marketing, public or state policy on literary creation, and a study of such avenues and media as film and television in advancing literary creativity (2000:21). It is within this purview that the art and creativity of the playwright which had been hitherto mediated by the television play but now are being increasingly demanded and utilized by the new video medium will be situated.

As a precursor of the video, the television play, according to Bamidele, has shifted the attention of many playwrights from the stage. There are those who have been associated with live theatre who no longer write and perform for the live theatre and we are witnesses to a ‘presumed’ death of dramatic art ...(2000:50).

In essence, what we have today are familiar flips mediated by new illusion of the communication technology, a global invasion which is reawakening the appreciation of local cultural traditions (Idegu 2002:19).

Instead of a content analysis this paper will examine the aesthetic, historical and socio-economic context of the playwright and the perceived symbiotic influence of the two genres.

Art, Craft, the Playwright and Society

The craft of the playwright, over the centuries, has passed through different stages of modification and maturation as societal demands dictate. Since the playwright lives within, and writes for the same society, it is inevitable that he has to move along with society's dynamic pace or even, be a 'pace' ahead of the realities which surround him like a web. From this web, he strives to extricate himself by fashioning a tool (perhaps in the manner of Ogun, Yoruba guardian god of creativity, on his descent from heaven) with words strung together in dialogical form, in order to transmit an exclusive feeling and use this as a weapon of reaction to the social, political and circumstances which promote or militate against the society's progress.

It is imperative to state that drama is a literary genre and a literary creation in which human imagination is entangled with human activities-a process of tying and untying a knot, (Adewoye:1994) throwing up two phenomena: the author's creative imagination and perception of his/her world; and the realistic world of other human beings, who are being represented as well as imitated in and through the playwright's art. Thus, it is a synthetic activity of the creative matrix.

Dramatic art in any developed form is essentially a communal activity which relies on certain conditions for its flowering and development. These include:

- i) A world-view which predisposes the people to ritual practices requiring a strong element of role playing;
- ii) An inclination to narrative expression, based on that community's own history and legends, myth and folklore;
- iii) A strong feeling for social solidarity which, with the emergence of an embryonic form of drama from the interactions of conditions 1 and 2 above, fosters the resultant art form, not only as an expression of the community's ethos but perhaps, more important, as a means of further strengthening its sense of cohesion and identity;
- iv) A system of notation through which the most successful dramatic creative acts are communicated to wider audiences

and what is more, conserved and kept in some memory for future generations;

- v) Freedom or protection from such traumatic historical experiences as ruthless religious, political and economic domination by aliens.

The above conditions not only capture the essence of a dramatic artist, they also elucidate how he comes to terms with the realities of his time in fashioning a drama of substance. The playwright must be able to see beyond his nose, as it were. That is, since drama is scenic, his dramatic view of the world must reflect a complete global scene. Although W.B. Yeats contends that 'there is no art without a nation, all art has always had a nationality', it is pertinent to add here that art, after its nationality, must also aspire for universality, even beyond. Then, and only then can one understand the world-view of the artist in this case, the playwright.

In another dimension, the people's own heritage provides ample source for the playwright who wants to create and narrate stories from the history and legends, myths and folklore, for the entertainment, education and enlightenment of his audience. He reserves the right to re-mould the materials from these sources, to suit his own vision or interpretation of his society.

Since he writes of, within and for the same society, the playwright is guided by a sense of duty to uphold the indivisible sense of unity which exists within the society. The collective image of the society must be his point of duty to enhance and promote through his art; since one, he is a mirror and two, a representative of the society, through and by virtue of his art. Through him, honour is brought to the society, or otherwise. His art is an embodiment of all that is good in the society, though, this is not to say that he should not expose the ills of the society when the need arises. What becomes of his corrective and reflective enterprise is his paramount concern. The exposition and reflection of the ills and shortcomings of society is the playwright's major preoccupation. He holds up a mirror, for the society to see itself and thereafter, make amends, for change; change, being the only permanent phenomenon in life.

Drama is predominantly evolutionary. The point here is that along with other arts, drama is continually evolving; it begins with a simple popular form, and becomes, with gathering momentum, complex and acceleratingly literary. Drama has grown, improved, and progressed from the rudimentary and naïve to the fully mature, articulated and sophisticated genre we now reckon with today. The continually changing nature has its basis in the concept that it is constantly being adapted to prevailing needs, fantasies and sensibilities, whereas it has been produced by same factors or circumstances.

Trends, Vision and a Generation: An Appraisal

Individual dramatic genres have developed both in purpose and in form, from the complex to the simple or vice-versa. This is why generations have come to take over from preceding ones, in order to make the evolution possible, for the heritage and tradition to flourish. The fact must also be stressed that the changing, and growth of a new genre or the fading of an old, often takes off from events outside the drama, and not necessarily from sentiments that it is time for something new to put an end to obsolescent forms.

This changing process and constant evolution are traceable to the pioneers of the dramatic art through the succeeding body of young playwrights. Both the pioneers and the successors thus enjoy the ample opportunity of using the economy, politics, ideology, community consciousness, etc. as canvas to exert some influence on society through their depiction on how to possess wealth, and criticism of particular ways of using same; encourage or condemn use or abuse of power; reinforce or protest existing sensibility, order, expectation, social rankings and social distances; and strengthen established values through suggestive forms or content capable of filling the imagination or raising their own question by presenting alternative variables which are irreconcilable with existing values.

If all of the above can well be taken as the playwright's vision, then it goes to establish the fact that he is in the society to shape things for the better, since he is a mirror, a watchdog, and a conscience of the society. Therefore, he creates his art (drama) as a response to the prevailing social reality in which he works and this response correlates with the existing direction of the historical and socio-political pendulum at any particular point, or in a particular environment, otherwise herein called trend, the standard 'twists and turns' of human experience.

Thus, the evolution being talked about coincides with the trend as I want to see it, as far as dramatic literature is concerned. Artistic creativity is enhanced when an increased social need for art coincides with an ample supply of resources for artistic production. Thus, before and after, but not during the most intense phase of any cycle of technological, political, ideology or communal change in the society, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, however, this supply battles with the 'the law of diminishing returns' during the phase of most intense radical change, like rapid economic accumulation, technological transformation, high points of religious (or secular ideological) reformations, and struggles for imperial consolidation, rational liberation, or change of political system.

Drama and theatre ultimately are bound to change in society. As Elo Ibagere has argued that change in modern times or societies can be described as planned phenomenon (Ibagere: 1992), sometimes unplanned, change invariably is a phenomenon that is permanent, and thus assumes a pride of place in the playwright's pre-occupation as he has to direct his predominant motifs towards the celebration or otherwise of the socio-political currents or trends. The change in society brings about the change in the dramatic or thematic trend. Hence, new themes are forged in the same way as the dynamism of revolution. And artistic revolution and/or evolution crystallising in trends, new trends that is, now becomes the prerogative of modern or contemporary playwrights.

Thus, the kaleidoscope of dramatic forms in Nigeria is constantly shifting, to capture the prevailing moods, aspirations, angst, etc. of the people to the extent that theatre as a whole is a phenomenon which emerges and develops at a particular time and place and is bound up with the destiny of its determinate social function. This function has come to be underscored by the illusion of the video technology.

Video Technology and Creative Symbiosis

Inasmuch as media tend towards complication and sophistication due to technological development, the playwright has continued to use the video film medium to tell stories of his angst, his unfulfilled aspirations and ultimately, his hopes for the tomorrow of his society. Idegú (2002) has noted the video script writer's (the new nomenclature) undaunting response to the challenge of

western influence through his indigenous themes which have taken cognizance of our cultural heritage in their creative and artistic synthesis.

With the emergence of the video, many stage playwrights, actors, directors and producers (actor-managers) have had the exposure to the television and a brief stint with the celluloid, transformed into the faces (visible and invisible) of the new video age. The late doyen of the Nigerian theatre himself, Herbert Ogunde blazed the trail by introducing technological illusion for the evocation of mystery, awe and wonder – all to the delight of the audience.

Some of his colleagues were to follow in the emerging cinematic genre, transposing their popular and indigenous Yoruba repertory into the new form, giving Nigeria her folkloric film tradition in contemporary times. (Malomo, 1993:2). The celluloid was however supplanted by the video technology due to factors of economics. As Alain Busson notes,

the new medium (of video) offers broader possibilities for programming and broadcasting than hitherto existing media. The cost of production is much less if one relates it to the potential audience and the means of purchase are simpler and financially more attractive to the consumer (Busson 1985:103).

Aesthetically, scripting for the folkloric film was based on improvisation and storytelling since the troupe leader was the actor-manager, leading actor, playwright and director all rolled into one. They held sway for about a decade, from the late 1970s to the late '80s, before the home video phenomenon upstaged the form, due to exorbitant cost of celluloid film production, no thanks to the dismal fate of Naira at the international market.

At the inception of the video film, there was a carry-over of the same method of scripting from the traditional theatre production techniques of the folkloric films, with the director of photography (D.O.P) or cameraman preparing a shooting script with a list of the sequences of events and characters, from the scenario told by the troupe leader. This style is called the scenario or synopsis format. In rehearsals before shooting, the story is fleshed out, with appropriate dialogical exchange between the actors and actresses while the

catch-line for the scenes, respectively, is always indicated in the shooting script.

The film idea is generated from the theme which usually captures the social realities of its originating country. Although many of our video film producers today still rely on the synopsis format, perhaps due to the inherited resources but there is an evolution of screen writers being encouraged by other producers to craft screen plays which are used for rehearsals and subsequently, the shooting.

Tunde Kelani of Mainframe Productions is one of the few producers who insist on a script for his home video films. And in this regard, he has produced *Ayo Ni Mofe* (Part 2) written by late Wale Ogunyemi, one of Nigeria's literary dramatists of the syncretic order; *O le Ku* and *Koseegbe* by Akinwumi Isola, Professor of Yoruba literature and a playwright, *Ti Oluwa Nile* (Parts 1-3) by Kareem Adepoju "Baba Wande" - all on whose scriptwriting talents Kelani has drawn (Haynes/Okome, 2000:58); *Thunderbolt*; *White Handkerchief*; *Saworoide*; *Agogo Eewo* and a host of others.

Amaka Igwe is another writer and director who produces her work on video from her scripts. She has *Rattlesnake*, *Adamma* (Igbo films) *Violated* (Parts 1 & 2) and *Forever* to her credit, among others. Other notable writer/producers are Opa Williams; Okechukwu Ogunjiofor, Kenneth Nnebue, Zeb Ejiro, Chico Ejiro, Andy Amenechi, Charles Novia, Don Pedro Obaseki, Adebayo Salami (Bello) Jide Kosoko; Taiwo Hassan (Ogogo), Dele Odule, Fred Amata, Mathias Obahiagbon; Teco Benson; Simi Opeoluwa; Tarila Thompson, Eberonwu, Kabat Esosa Egbon, Emem Isong, to mention but a few.

Challenges before a Generation

Wole Ogundele observes that the supplantation of the traveling theatre by the drama video is not a case of technology at the service of tradition, but rather tradition at the service of technology (2000:98).

However, it is pertinent to stress that with the present realities in the industry, the inevitable truism of the wish he expressed a few years back is no longer in doubt. There is presently a creative symbiosis arising from this interaction,

and this is a pointer to the radical maturation of both the medium and the mediators, the screen writers.

The challenges before them appear enormous in the steady march of the video into its second decade of existence and revolution of the dramatic art. If the Nigerian home video is to qualify for entry in African and international film festivals, the criteria for proper formatting have to be met by the producers (Haynes, 2000:1) and I see absolutely no weakness on the part of these playwrights and screen writers in rising up to the challenges of contemporary demands in the context of filmmaking, but rather great promise.

Afolabi Adesanya's expressed fear in the imminent extinction on the one hand, and his optimism in the revival and return of celluloid filmmakers in the not-too-distant future on the other, do not in any way erode the present production trend of video and its fast-paced encroachment into the traditional market of the cinema (2000:49). According to him, although there appears no visible generational successors to the pioneers, feature filmmakers are better equipped to give the Nigerian film audience their money's worth in epic spectacles, serious drama, or action-packed thrillers, with a manifestation of literary, artistry and historical, contemporary, or futuristic perspectives. To this I quickly wish to add that some of the present video producers are resourceful enough to take the much desired plunge into the capital – intensive world of the cine, given the economic backbone.

The barometer for gauging the preparedness of this set of creative artists bursting with enormous talent for the above task should be seen from the perspective of an appreciable percentage of them being Theatre Arts graduates or others having acquired the necessary theoretical and background training in the art (through the National Film Institute, Jos, for instance) and are therefore, better poised to launch a *comeback* of the larger screen with their stirring, emotionally appealing and entertaining films. Happily, Adesanya himself acknowledges the intimidating new realities which the hopeful filmmaker, whether veteran or debutant, can readily tap from for filmmaking to be an intimate experience.

Concluding comments

Brian Larkin has argued that the video culture has thoroughly altered the landscape of Nigerian media (2000:209). In the same vein as the technology

has altered the landscape of the dramatic enterprise as an aesthetic form, the reception of which has been situated within the arena of sociological changes and economic re-ordering. The video films are some kind of hybrid, a form of popular art, a distinct to a new kind of awareness, signposting the revival of a dying cultural legacy, in this instance, theatrical drama. The new generation of playwrights - whom we recognize as the post-Osofisan generation (Ademiju – Bépo, 2005) have given form to the video medium, especially with the emergence of a highly talented young men (and women) in the business (Adeiza, 1997:10), thus making it the dominant technological medium of entertainment in Nigeria's urban centres (Ogundele, 1997:48).

The tickling observation of Femi Osofisan comes readily to mind here:

With the development of satellites and the internet, the World Wide Web pages... CNN comes directly from Atlanta into our bedrooms and parlours in Ibadan or Nairobi, bringing such cargo as the spice girls and the funeral of Princess Diana along with numerous European sports and comedy channels... Eagerly and enthusiastically, we consume the movies, CD-ROMS, records... produced in Hollywood, India or Japan (1997:5).

When one considers that Nigerian home videos are also now available on VCDs and DVDs, the acquisition of CD machines by those who can afford it, either new or fairly-used, *Tokunbo*, will definitely be on the rise, a development which further shrinks the probabilities of the larger screen and its revival. The Global system of mobile communication, popularly called GSM, now makes the viewing of motion picture possible on handsets!

The internet and the proliferation of cybercafés and VCD Clubs is another factor in the current symbiosis of the theatre of illusion and the video technology. These two venues are fast taking over from the cinema theatres, many of which have already been turned into banking halls, churches, warehouses, mosques and shopping malls and are attracting customers in droves, while government appears not willing, at least for now, to rescue the trend.

Where then lies the fate of the new medium, even as it goes digital or high definition, almost on a daily basis? Only time can tell.

NOTES

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