

# DRAMATURGY OF SPACE AND THEATRICALITY OF COUNTER-TERRORISM: *FAREWELL TO BABYLON* AND *FAREWELL TO A VIRUS OF ANOMIE* AS PARADIGMS

**Adediran Kayode ADEMIJU-BEPO, PhD**

Department of Theatre & Film Arts

University of Jos, Jos

Plateau State, Nigeria

Email: ademijubepok@unijos.edu.ng

## **Abstract**

That the Greeks gave us the *theatre* as “a seeing place” since the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC is no longer contested, because it is a space; space, according to the *English Dictionary*, being “of unlimited or generalised physical extent or a bounded or specific physical extent”. Consequently, several scholars, including Peter Brook, have come up with diverse definitions and perceptions about the space of performance. Theatre is “an act of arts and an art of acts”, since several acts and arts collaborate to ‘terrorise’ the audience into accepting the point of view expressed on stage, the space. Whereas terrorism is a method which can be used by any group or person and for any kind of motive, terrorism equally involves unlawful and typical random acts of violence or the threat of such violence employed by an individual, group, or government to achieve political goal, counter-terrorism is all about measures intended to combat or reduce terrorist activities. This paper argues that Nigerian playwrights and dramatists have created drama of counter-terrorism to pass warnings to the public about the contestation for the Nigerian space by many groups or individuals. The theory of social change and the literary theory of Eagleton are used in looking at two plays which dwell on the theme of counter-terrorism, from different perspectives. The paper concludes that the dramaturgy of Bode Sowande and ‘Diran Ademiju-Bepo has helped in charting a survival agenda to counter the terrorism of contestation for space.

## **Introduction**

Man naturally loves space because it is the essential and sustaining element of his existence. After all, he grows within a space called the womb and comes out into the world to encounter another space that will help him fulfil his destiny and exits into another space that serves for his resting place until eternity. Wole Soyinka and many other prominent scholars in theatre, Anthropology and Archaeology have done quite a commendable job on and around space, starting from the seminal work by Soyinka, *The Fourth Stage*.

But why think seriously about space at all? It is because space is of time; unlimited or generalised physical extent; or a bounded or specific physical extent. If this were not so, Peter Brook would not have documented his experience of theatre in *The*

*Empty Space* being the fulcrum of theatrical expression itself. Taking off from Brook, therefore, theatre thrives on space, that is, space as in time, unlimited physical stretch or a specific place with boundaries. The playwright also uses his dramaturgy to create space and a semblance of a 'new world' for the characters, a world in which everything works, in which there is no shadow of electricity or water failure, in which characters 'play' as they are creatively interpreted in role playing by actors, under the artistic guidance of a director. The director equally uses space to create *mise en scene*, that theatrical ambience within which he dumps the cast to narrate the story for the delight or pain of an audience, which Patrice Pavis describes as,

the synchronic confrontation of signifying systems, and it is their interaction, not their history, that is offered to the spectator and that produces meaning... all signifying systems, in particular the utterance of the dramatic text in performance. *Mise en scene* is not an empirical object, the haphazard assembling of materials, the ill-defined activity of the director and stage team prior to performance. It is an object of knowledge, a network of associations or relationships uniting the different stage materials into signifying systems, created both by production (the actors, the director, the stage in general) and reception (the spectators) (24-25).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The social change theory implies what Peter Ekegren, in his contribution to methodological debate, and to illuminate the ways in which different readings of a single text are created and defended, describes as the offshoot of the structuralist debates of the 1970s in which the field of textual analysis has largely remained the preserve of literary theorists (8). Social scientists, while accepting that observation is theory laden, have tended to take the meaning of texts as a given and to explain differences of interpretation either in terms of ignorance or bias. Ekegren further avers that social theory covers one kind of *intentionalism*, that is, a kind of understanding that claims that the meaning of a text is to be located in the author's intentions. Here, in the teleological mode of reading, the author's intentions are supposed to be closest to fulfilment in his last text, in the light of which his intentions and, in the same move, meanings in earlier texts are identified.

Through the critique of these different themes or notions, notable for their fundamental denunciation of the text itself, Ekegren will argue that it is necessary instead to consider the text *in its own right*, with what flaws it may have, such as, for example, gaps, inconsistencies, ambiguities, and in so doing laying bare its meaning-producing structures. Accepting the text's *incompleteness*, two things will be accomplished. It will be possible to see how the text is a necessary condition of existence for the production of multiple meanings, and it will also be possible to understand how different readers, belonging to different schools of thought, may seize upon alternate meanings in the text and thus produce divergent interpretations when reading the same text.

On the other hand, Ifeanyi Ugwu opines that the idea of change is central to revolutionism and reformism but while the former implies the use of force, may involve

violence, disorder, suddenness and anti-democratic principles, the latter is democratic and does not require violence or abruptness (2). Reformism and revolutionism (the practice of or “support for” social or political revolution) are processes of change but they differ in their modes of operation. Reformism refers to “any doctrine or movement that advocates social or political change in a gradual manner, within a democratic framework rather than a revolutionary change (*Chambers* 1028).

### **Reality of Space and the Immediacy of Theatre**

Realistically, space has achieved a presence of being, like movies, “an emotional immediacy that seems unmediated – simply there, without a history, without apparatus, without anything actually between us except the story” (Kolker xvii). In the greater scheme of things, space means so much to the theatre artist, whichever side of the pendulum he belongs. From the playwright, the designers, to the director – we all interpret the script within a space. The script or play text therefore becomes the reference point of all theatrical activities that take place. However, between the text and production, there is a certain terrorism that has to be countered, a terrorism which Pavis, in his seminal discourse on the nature of the relationship between text and performance, describes as *mise en scene*, the bringing together or confrontation, in a given space and time, of different signifying systems, for an audience (29). According to him, the audience see a performance which is more or less comprehensible, in which the text is only one of several components, others being the actors, the space, the tempo (24). It is in this light that we see the playwrights hereunder studied having dexterously demonstrated great creative ingenuity in employing and exploring space through their dramaturgy and theatricality.

One finds a semblance of the Nigerian space in the two plays in discourse, as we explore both texts. Olakunle Thompson and Remi Aduradola, quoting John Macionis, contend that while war involves conventional warfare, terrorism uses sporadic and random acts of violence to cause fear (1). W. B. Worthen also contends that that,

the meanings of modern drama cannot be fully seized without considering how those meanings are produced as theatre. For in the theatre, drama can speak only through the practices of acting and directing, the construction of the material space of the *mise-en-scène*, and the arrangement and disposition of the audience (1).

### **Textual Explorations of Change, Rebirth and Terrorism in *Farewell to Babylon***

Change is at the heart of Sowande’s drama and he has pursued this with a difference of approach from the vision and enthusiasm of Kole Omotoso and Femi Osofisan. For instance, Olu Obafemi has argued that, while Osofisan is impatient with animist metaphysics in art, what he calls ‘superstition’ and ‘mystification’, Sowande is deeply committed to the search for an ‘equipoise’ between materialism and metaphysical reality (260).

Sowande also embraces the mytho-ritual, in the search for social liberation through collective action but from both the materialist and spiritual dimensions as

perspective. This vision, he has defined as ‘Spiritual Nationalism’ enunciated through Onita’s philosophy of spiritual socialism in *Farewell to Babylon*, according to Olu Obafemi (261). The same philosophy comes to the fore in *Sanctus for Women*, which explores the conflict between the economic and the spiritual; capitalism and ‘communitarianism’; and the individual versus the group, here represented by the Iroko and the spirit of wealth. Social regeneration, an offshoot of social consciousness is the music that rebirth and liberation can help to nurture.

*Farewell to Babylon*, Sowande’s third play reveals, at a more intense level, his political commitment and a conscious blend of theme and technique. As an experiment in the proposed alternative model for society, *Farewell* comes as a dramatic statement on the theatre of communal liberation through the mechanics of indigenous African thought and participation on the one hand, and a social revolution for radical change. As a sequel to *The Night Before*, *Farewell* seeks a rebirth from the moral decadence and degeneration which was rearing its ugly head in the larger society, away from the four walls of the university campus, a sort of haven. False values versus an ideal society form the central plot of the play, in search of rebirth through collective action of the intellectual and the masses to bring about social regeneration. This is achieved through the story of four former student leaders – Moniran, Nibidi, Onita and Dabira – brimming with the Marxist enthusiasm of overthrowing the oppressor, represented by Babylon, vividly portrayed in *The Night Before*. They all undergo a metamorphosis after their graduation from the ivory tower, confronted by the realities of the outside world.

Moniran gives an indication of this realisation when he says to Major Kasa, his military ally:

**Moniran:** There is a dream and there is a reality. The reality now is Babylon and at its head is the Field Marshall. The dream, my friend, the dream is change: the taste of pain and release. And that needs discipline (*Farewell... 70*).

Disillusioned by the social structure, Onita joins the farmers’ movement for the simple reason, as he puts it: of

**Onita:** Learning from them. The decadence of my life mixed with the freshness of what they have to offer may give my future a new meaning (77).

Although he is a visionary, he rejects the notion of heroism or a messiah in the face of Babylon. In an exchange with Moniran, now the ‘Octopus of the Special Department’, he declares:

**Onita:** Why do you want to make a hero of me? I am no hero. I do not want to be a hero. Not a messiah. I sincerely want a new way of life. A simple life. Look at the state of the nation, the aggressive materialism. As a man, all I saw for us was chaos. And then, I discovered the farmers (79).

In his desperate bid to avoid a messianic posture, Moniran undergoes an internal turmoil about his revolutionary intention and ends up a traitor in Onita's estimation because he has become the administrative head of a bourgeois military dictatorship. He is later to stage a *palace coup d'état* against the same regime he serves in, an act which can never be taken as a total revolution for which the masses yearn, but rather an act of terrorism. It is obvious that Sowande in this play has brought to the full glare of the audience, the superstructure made up of the military, the political, the business and the intelligence elites involved in the crass, aggressive materialism that have come to characterise the power elite represented by the Realm, in this contestation for the Nigerian space. Only a socio-spiritual regeneration as an ideology could bring salvation.

The Farmers' Movement on the other hand typifies the corps of indigenous revolutionary elements who sustain the ethos of spiritual communalism of prosperity and equal distribution of wealth and cultural liberation in an animist bond with the earth, giver of life. Oduloju, son of the movement's head, Dansaki, enthuses, quoting from Onita:

**Oduloju:** ...the earth should symbolise the egalitarian principle of human existence... Earth guards gold. Earth yields food. Either in food or in mineral, there should be no such thing as poverty, except only when the yield of the earth and the work it demands are not appreciated. Value therefore the things of the earth and let the farmer and the technician have their due in equal appreciation.

The dramatic technique employed by the playwright ensures the audience's participation in the thematic exploration through the devices of pantomime, direct communication, music, songs (both ritual and pentecostal), dance, traditional praise chant, parody, caricature and the theatrical marriage of mime, dialogue and music with folktale (for example, Mr. Tortoise and Elephant). The intention here is to reveal his ideological leaning and the political statement in the play from the two worlds – one of the farmers, the other of the ideologues – created by him. Sowande in *Farewell* shows theatrical maturity in the handling of the theme begun in *The Night Before* as part of his own contribution to the theatre of revolutionary alternative.

Sowande's dramaturgy comes to the fore in this play about the choices a playwright can make when projecting an ideology. Such choices emerge within the theatre's systematic ways of putting the drama into play. Not only are these practices specific to a given moment in history, they also have a manifestly *rhetorical* dimension. The theatre works to claim a certain kind of meaning for the drama by claiming – even legitimating – a certain kind of experience for the audience as significant. The rhetoric of theatre, that is, frames a relationship between the drama, stage production, and audience interpretation, and it is within that relationship that our experience as an audience takes place. The experience one gets watching *Babylon* is that of a theatricality of space as the entire drama comes out within the prism of counter-terrorism.

### **Synoptic Overview of a Text for Social Change: *Farewell to a Virus of Anomie***

The creation of life and all around it are appreciated through the scenic beauty. Scenery has a real or imagined line that marks the limits. It exists within a particular space, which means a particular scene can be distinguished from another. Theatre is an environment for expression; space whether natural or derived as a platform for that expression through creative imitation. Peter Brook sees theatre as an empty space, as aforementioned, with a capacity for an 'actor' and 'audience'. Michael Etherton sees drama as, "a process of social development in a way we represent ourselves and our society to ourselves" (62). The role of drama is to creatively unfold the problems that bother the human society, to raise consciousness and provoke positive change.

*Farewell to a Virus of Anomie* is a parable on life, love, politics, choices, and the ultimate triumph of individual wills in the face of the new ideology of our time: individualism and survivalism. Abdulsalam describes the play as capturing the lives of some university undergraduates on campus, namely Ahmed, Lara, Koby, Kesh, Zainab, Major (ID), among others (4-5). Ahmed and Lara are lovers, but both cannot enjoy intimacy because Ahmed has lost his sexual prowess to a campus secret cult group called Brotherhood of the Wasps (BOW), of which he became a member to gain power of belonging. Ahmed's emptiness makes Lara really dissatisfied and sad that she seeks for means to restore his manhood. Kesh, a member of BOW, employs Major (ID), another cultist, to rape Koby in return for a past favour, simply because she turns down his love advances. Ahmed, however, admits his problem and expresses the willingness to be restored. This leads to the formation of a resistant group by three female friends: Lara, Koby and Zainab, called, the Amazing Grace Sisters (AGS), with the aim of revolting against the secret cults on campus and helping victims of their nefarious activities who have become subject to their torture and penalty. Ahmed is finally rescued from secret cultism and his conscience restored by the AGS, as well as other cultists who were willing to break free from the clutches of the fraternities.

In one of the sub-themes, Koby's father, a retired but not tired Commodore, is one of the leaders of the political party whose headquarters suffers a bomb explosion which leads to many casualties. After his daughter is assaulted by a rapist, he invades the University campus with law enforcement agents to arrest her assailant, while the students who refuse to surrender their arms are seen as rebels, and perpetrators of kidnapping, militancy, insurgency, terrorism, armed robbery, assassins, pipeline vandalisation, violence, and the likes. The police arrest and charge them before a special tribunal, which finds the guilty and sentences them to seven (7) years imprisonment. Koby and ID (Major) get married later after graduation, without knowing they shared a past together. On their wedding night, in the course of their intimate moments, the groom discovers a scar on his bride's thigh, which leads her to unfold a dark part of her past she would have loved to forget, as she narrate her ordeal with a rapist back in school, to which ID subsequently confesses being her masked assailant. ID moves to end the marriage which has hardly begun as he pleads for Koby's forgiveness, as according to him, his past will haunt him for ever in the marriage:

**ID:** I am quitting ... You cannot forgive me for the pain I have caused you. So, I will not bother you. I am turning back from here.... The honeymoon had turned sour before it started ... Yes, not too late... to turn back... (67).

The play ends as Koby is faced with the choice to forgive him or not, as she already loves him, coupled with the realisation that he deflowered her through the rape act, blaming the system on campus for making him a victim.

**Koby:** It is, my love. It is too late to turn back...and I have forgiven him... I mean you. We can always push the past behind us.... I loved you and still love you, in spite of all that has happened... Love heals all, my dear husband. With love, the virus of anomie has been captured and buried... (68).

**Dramaturgy of Space and Theatricality of Counter-terrorism: *Farewell* and *Anomie***  
From the foregoing, it is obvious that the main objective of this presentation is to show that theatre presents itself as an ideal space for the dramaturgical experimentation of the quest for social change and reorganisation of the society, predicated on the contestation for space by different groups as evident in the two plays. The desire for a revolutionary change of the society compels some individuals to take on the messianic garb to challenge accepted norms and values such as the inviolability of the gods or the mafia. Sowande's *Farewell* is a drama of revolution as can be seen in the ideological pursuit of the characters, who graduated from the university with lofty dreams of how to liberate the society from the shackles of neo-liberalists, but whose dreams are later shattered due to the imperative of coming to terms with reality. The Utopia built while ingesting Marxist revolutionary mantra in the university soon dissipates before their very eyes like a pack of cards as they realise it is not easy to confront the oppressors. *Anomie* for instance argues that if the country must rid herself of the virus of moral decadence, corruption, oppression, prostitution, money laundering, secret cultism, kidnapping, terrorism, illegal possession of arms, killings, rape, and the likes, there must be a revolution. The social regeneration earnestly desired by the society is at the heart of this revolution.

For one, "Babylon" literally represents oppression; while the other, "anomie", is semantically and semiotically suggestive of anarchy and terror. Both plays feature the campus of a university in their theatricality of space and dramaturgy of terrorism, albeit, for *Anomie*, some events unfold outside the four walls of the campus; while in *Babylon*, the space created is in the 'real' world, after the utopian postulations on campus. Whereas the lead characters in *Farewell* do not belong to a campus cult, but are bound together by their Marxist beliefs and alliances, the protagonists in *Anomie* clearly bestride the world (space) of the fraternity on campus and in the outside world, going by the words of the Tribunal Chairman:

**Tribunal Chairman:** The menace of secret cult activities and the illegal importation of arms and ammunition into our campuses and staff quarters

have for some time in the recent past, been giving the authorities serious concern. The wanton impudence and clinical finesse, with which these brutes operate, if condoned by any administration, will not only be tantamount to the existence of a parallel government but also spell doom for the entire country.... Armed robbers and insurgents terrorise innocent citizens with their state-of-the-art weapons on the streets that nowhere is safe from them. Now, the ivory towers, citadels of learning and character, have been turned upside down, feet dancing in the air, by these nefarious cults which operate at night. Gone were the days when we sailed in broad daylight... (*Clearing his throat*) (*Anomie* 64-65).

These two worlds collide in theatrical *mise en scene* to give the audience a clear promise of how to counter the prevailing terrorism against the vulnerable group of victims, both on campus and off campus. The cultists use violence to seek power in *Anomie*:

**Ahmed:** ... I joined the cult because I wanted power but I had poverty. I acquired the power alright and was instrumental to the woes of many of my colleagues... (59).

While a former ally in *Farewell* uses the terrorism of a military coup d'état against the regime in which he is serving, in an attempt to liberate himself. The duo of Thompson and Aduradola contend that:

In Nigeria, terrorism was used in the establishment of the colonial states; likewise the indigenous people that occupied the pre-colonial states also countered this act used by the colonial hegemony to occupy their territories. While the tactics used by the British against the indigenes could be a conventional warfare, the indigenes in some circumstances used terror attack. It should however be noted that modern terrorism in Nigeria was first witnessed during the Maitatsine movement in 1980 led by Alhaji Marwa Maitatsine who is believed to be an immigrant. From his base, he made sure that his ideology was felt in the Northern states of Sokoto, Kano and Borno elicited the "justifiable" anger of the uprisings in Kano.... Though the difference between the two is that while terror was used by the indigenes against the colonialists in some communities, it was used by the group to spread an ideology (4).

From the above, it can be argued that the two plays in study portray tacitly, revolutionary ingredients of oppression, injustice, class segregation and discrimination, and violence to qualify for the contestation for the Nigerian space. The history of terrorism in Nigeria, therefore, is long and tortuous, to provide the ready raw materials for Sowande and Ademiju-Bepo's dramaturgy. The dramatic conflicts involving the diverse groups in the two play texts are replicas of the campaign of terror which we witness all around us in the real world.



## Conclusion

In the words of Maximilien Robertspierre, talking about how the Latin word, *terrere*, acquired its modern form 'terrorism', during the reign of terror in France in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, '...terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so much a special principle as it is a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country's most urgent needs' (Thompson and Aduradola 3).

This paper has examined the issues of social inclusion, which encompass integration and re-integration of the victims, the vulnerable population in our society who have been caught in the war, in the sporadic and random acts of violence which had caused fear and enthroned a reign of fear and terror. The members of the cults who renounced their membership are re-integrated back into the society to spend their energy in positive direction while those who refuse were and were caught in the acts, are sentenced to a period of incarceration. Moniran however suffers from social exclusion after seeing his co-revolutionaries face the reality from dream. The popularity of terrorism the world over notwithstanding, this presentation concludes that counter-insurgency provided by the two playwrights can be an appropriate strategy to mitigate the effects of terrorism.

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