

THE RADICAL ALTERNATIVE AND THE DILEMMA OF THE INTELLECTUAL DRAMATIST IN NIGERIA

by Dele Layiwola

Introduction

This paper examines some aspects of the theatrical vocation (as it is generally practiced) in response to recent developments in the political life of a developing nation. The works of dramatists with which we are concerned are those of the second generation of intellectual dramatists in Nigeria—Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotoso, Bode Sowande, as well as other university-based exponents of the tradition. In the main, they emerged from the experience of the early 1970s, at a time when the Nigerian nation prospered by the resources from oil wealth. This paper, however is restricted in scope to the treatment of one or two plays each from the repertoire both of Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan.

By 1970 the rise in economic prosperity gave rise to the emergence of a new class of middlemen who mediate between raw materials and produce consumers. For the same reason, class identification, the pursuit of economic ventures, the rise of the merchant class, etc. responded with a greater upsurge than they had ever done during the twentieth century. In the rather peculiar melee of the scramble for wealth, we find the rise of a middle class whose tastes and attitudes have not been fashioned by a definite historical culture or tradition. On the contrary, their interests relate only to the ease of a new-found wealth. It is also not unusual in circumstances of this kind that there will emerge a superstructure of new allegiances and attitudes, crime, deprivation, and status derived from wealth or property as opposed to age-old categories of the nobility of birth, lineage attributes, and other such markers of class and status differentiation.

The intellectual tradition of the West had just matured in Nigeria at the time. The sudden, uncontrolled upsurge of wealth as we have described above put the intellectual section of the middle class in a serious dilemma. The intellectuals (writers, literary critics, and the like) could not join in the crude scramble for new wealth as the middlemen would do since they received some kind of skilled training and acquired a tutored vocation. Whatever wealth they came by reached them through the establishment in the form of remuneration and emoluments, not from any direct involvement in free enterprise. Indeed, the intellectuals were meant to fully dedicate themselves to the training of the citizenry which would constitute the petty-bourgeois group of technocrats that would run the state machinery. Thus far, the intellectuals were under the impression that they were helping create an

intelligentsia that would later become a broad-based cultural type. Of greater concern and discomfort to them was the fact that those who had graduated into the middle classes because of their immediate access to wealth were not the type they could accept or identify with, and this for two major reasons:

(i) They did not possess learning of an intellectual kind that would have made them "scientific" or "modern," as Western-trained intellectuals saw it.

(ii) They did not have an earlier class tradition that determined group instincts, attitudes or tastes; neither did they make any innovative efforts to fashion a culture or an advanced technology to meet the demands of the time. They were merely importers of finished products from Europe.

Thus the medley of the middle classes which have emerged from that sudden economic boom are of a varied and grossly amorphous nature. They are realizations of an abrupt historical process. A large proportion of them have no understanding of the history and background of their counterparts in Europe, so that when they copy European products and attitudes, they have no criteria or values with which to judge or verify them. They are in a dilemma; sometimes, when they take over alien thought patterns, they apply them to the wrong purpose. They thus aggravate the irrationality that attends the abrupt emergence of people into a historical process. This is, in part, what Paulo Freire refers to when he speaks of the need for a critical education that will facilitate critical attitudes. In his own words, "... the naive consciousness with which the people had emerged into the historical process left them an easy prey to irrationality."¹

This is why the representation of power in Nigerian literature has often taken the form of symbolic characterization as stereotypes, upstarts, and mediocre personalities, and why also intellectuals are baffled, defeated, or even domesticated by the whims of such characters. A clear interplay of this can be seen in Achebe's *A Man of the People*, where a barely educated politician, Chief Nanga, turns the election tables against two bright, somewhat idealistic university graduates, Max and Odili.² This also goes for the interaction of roles as represented by a domineering landlord and a helpless vanguard in Ola Rotimi's incisive play *If*.³

I

For over a decade now, the intellectual and the intellectual writer in Nigeria seem to have been confused about how to critically conceive of, or artistically represent, the section of their own middle class and its peculiar bed-fellow—the nouveau riche, a contemporary transposition of the pre-colonial merchant class. This phenomenon has not made light the yoke of writers who often find it difficult to represent, in European terms, the concept of middle class that is disembodied by the peculiarity of the Nigerian situation. The writer is in a dilemma as to how to portray characters realistically within the medley of a cultural composition which is not uniform. The middle class in Nigeria is an agglomeration of amorphous elements with varied, even contradictory, characteristics and attitudes. In art, then, there is a problem with character transposition from reality, especially where the knowledge of one can usefully illuminate the other. It is necessary to illustrate this situation with Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*.⁴

Ola Rotimi adapted the milieu of a Greek polity to that of a Yoruba environment. One of the problems of characterization in the play is the fact that the marital norm of Greek monogamy is difficult to reconcile to polygamy of Yoruba monarches. In spite of the fact that Rotimi mentions that the king has two wives, Ouola and Abero, he tactically highlights the role of only one of them—the same one who is the king's unfortunate mother. An attempt to shift the bulk of dramatic attention to an individual queen results in the play overdramatizing her role. The woman is old enough to be the king's mother, yet she kneels and curtsies on every slight occasion and does the chores that a younger wife in the place would normally perform in reality. She acts in such a docile manner, responding slavishly to the whims of the batty king, Odewale. For Rotimi's dramatic purpose, she annexes the role of the younger wife, but at the expense of her status and integrity. Consequently, her dramatic potential and stature at the point of discovery are undermined. Such a character subverts aesthetic plausibility, considering the extent of the tragic heroism intended for her at the end of the play.

An even more interesting point is that Oedipus is not a feudal lord in the same sense Odewale is, but a monarch in the archaic sense of Western democracy. Even if he is a man of property, he does not automatically "own" all the land. In his own culture, he does not have the tendency to take wives and raise children to boost the population that will help in working the land. Many ancient Yoruba chieftains saw themselves as having such responsibilities. We will recall that while the late king Adetusa clashed with Odewale (the hero in Rotimi's play) on

matters of agrarian right and ownership, Sophocles' King Laius clashed with Oedipus on a mere right of way.

Thus the concept of right, or of equity, in both societies of the time is somewhat different. Certainly, a society in which a king and a commoner could both share a narrow alley in similar carriages, subscribe to the same right of way, and argue such rights extensively, presupposes a kind of democracy not normally found in entrenched feudalism. Rotimi's comparative interpretation of political structures in both societies is thus inconclusive. There is every indication that Rotimi brings aspects of the modern domestic and family unit to bear on the role of the king, his queen, and the conduct of his small family. The royal affluence is streamlined to a certain moderateness, and Odewale's household looks like a nuclear unit. This is not often the case in reality. It is in fact the exact opposite to the conduct of that feudalist era in Yoruba history.

Rotimi's more recent play, *If*, represents its characters with greater consistency, and is one of the successes in the intellectual tradition of the second generation of Nigerian writers. The urban poor are portrayed against a more defined background, and the emerging intellectual vanguard also clearly responds to the same kind of inner motivation and with a perception that is even and uniform. It articulates a known tradition deriving from the same educational background, and is thereby more realistic about the Nigerian situation of the play's setting.

Femi Osofisan's attempts to project the theater as a means of conscientization that will lead to cultural action is commendable as theory, if we compare, again, the model of Paulo Freire in *Cultural Action for Freedom*—that a people's political awareness could be stimulated if they gain objective distance from their world and address themselves to it as creative subjects.⁵ The model is meant to be self-sustaining in a dialectic, "dialogic" manner in which people react to events rather than that procedures be dictated to them. It is in this aspect of methodology that Femi Osofisan's theater does not entirely survive the practical thrust of theory. The dramatist elects himself as a teacher dictating what he thinks is right instead of articulating events for critical attention. His dialectic is highly emotional, and he sentimentalizes rebellion in his attempts to suggest means of progressive action to those who might be inspired to social reform.

In his play *Morountodun*,⁶ Osofisan abstracts the positive aspects of the Yoruba legend of Moremi, a saga of womanist heroism, and uses it to inspire the heroine of his play. The legend of Moremi is the story of a woman who, at the dawn of Yoruba history in Ile-Ife, represents a matriarchal effort to reform society through the strategy of self-denial and tact as opposed to war and military force.

The Yoruba, in their search for a homeland, got to Ife, the aboriginal settlement of a people known as the Igbos. These are not the Igbos of Southeastern Nigeria, as the name probably derived from a species of giant birds (Agbigbo) native to the region. The Yoruba, under their suzerain, Oduduwa, subjugated the Igbos and imposed their own polity on the autochthons.

The Igbos later regrouped and successfully wreaked vengeance on the Yoruba settlers. They often invaded Ile-Ife, disguised in costumes of raffia which were probably the cult vestments of their deities. Their successes perplexed the new settlers, and it was later that the market matron and leader of the women's guild, Moremi, allowed herself to be captured in order that she might discover the true nature of Igbo invincibility. She acted under the good will of a feminine deity.

They carried her as a slave to the Igbo king who, impressed by her charm and beauty, married her and made her the pre-eminent queen in the palace. Moremi did not lose sight of her goal: she discovered that Igbo marauders used raffia costumes, and that it was a readily inflammable material. She escaped to the Yoruba country, and when the Igbos came raiding again, they were set alight from flaming torches. They suffered a heavy loss in battle, and their king, Alaiyemore, was captured. Moremi was honored and granted the status of a feminine archetype thereafter. This, more or less briefly, is the legend.

The heroine in Osofisan's play is the daughter of an unscrupulous trader whose connection in high places allies her with oppressors and brazen exploiters of labour. Next, the playwright makes Titubi, the Alhaja's daughter, to "repent" of the inclinations of her social class. She allies with the peasants she is supposed to betray, and thus recalls the legendary Moremi as her source of inspiration. Before the play ends, however, she repudiates the personality of Moremi because she thinks Moremi herself served the state and not the people:

. . . I knew I had to kill the ghost of Moremi in my belly, I am not Moremi: Moremi served the state, was the state, was the spirit of the ruling class. But it is not true that the state is always right. . . .(p. 70)

In the first place, the actual event of a peasant uprising in Western Nigeria in September 1969 (also called the Agbekoya uprising), which the author cites as the basis of the play, cannot be historically correlated with the heroic inspiration of Moremi and its context in Yoruba legend. The Agbekoya revolt of 1969 was a spontaneous uprising against an unjust political system that subjugated peasants under ill-conceived fiscal laws and taxation. The legend of Moremi's heroism concerned a communal mystery about the 12th century (A. D.), in which moral and supernatural elements determined

the criteria of questhood. The time-lapse between the two epochs presupposes widely differing modes of political constitution and belief systems. The machinery of emerging capitalism is quite different from a purely agrarian communality. The two incidents do not therefore bear corresponding symmetry, contrary to the presumption of Osofisan's adaptation.

It seems to me that it is the same misconception of the guidelines of praxis that is responsible for the play confusing the stage used for the actual play, *Morountodun*, with the imaginary stage of the play within the play. When the director of the play within the play needs a witness to confirm his identity to the police, he casually elects the audience:

DIRECTOR: But I swear to you that. . . oh God, where are these actors? Listen - (casting about desperately, his eyes light upon the audience) - Ask them! They will tell you. (pp. 10-11)

The arbitrary correlation of categories is further confirmed when the superintendent of police, who has come to restore order, refers to the same stage for the two different plays: "I think this is enough. Madam, I appeal to you, please leave the stage now." (p. 12)

There is the obvious fact that the narrator assumes that the audience with which he wishes to engage in a dialogue would always be on the side of justice and of the people. The playwright dramatizes actual events, and even cites the actual date of the Agbekoya uprising (p. 5) which forms the basis of the play. He thus interchanges the theatrical stage with the center of social praxis. Unfortunately, such an assumption would reveal that the audience, freely selected from across the citizenry, is made up of the oppressors as well as the oppressed. How could we then nominate them as absolute arbiters? There seems to me, therefore, to be a basic misapplication of the doctrine of popular culture as a means to conscientization. It is here confused with what Freire terms "massification." On the part of consumers of such a theater, naivete results from the uncritical nature of their conscientizing medium.

The unintended flaw in a play like *Morountodun* has far-reaching implications when the play is seen in the context of education for social development. A situation in which an opinion is dramatized without a lot of analytical substantiation often presupposes that reality is an unchanging, fossilized phenomenon and that different generations in historical experience are governed by the same fundamental, unchanging social principles. *Morountodun* is fraught with uncritical assumptions of this kind where, for instance, the metropolis or the city is seen as an all-given contrast to suburbia or the country; or that the values of oppression are limited only to the metropolis. Note, for instance, the observation of a revolutionary soldier named Marshall: "City people

have no compassion. The well-fed dog has no thought for those who are hungry." (p. 45)

The play also occasions such simplicity of thought as the heroine, Titubi, exhibits:

You taught me her story, mama. When I was still too young to understand. But I have never forgotten: Moremi, the brave woman of Ile-Ife, who saved the race. Now, when I wear this necklace, I feel a passion deeper than any passing vogue. It is as if I have become history itself. (p. 20)

It is supposed that there could exist a rather easy situation where an erstwhile exploiter could reverse allegiance to his or her class and thereafter feel glib remorse as is lavishly recounted by Titubi:

That was when I began to ask questions. Questions. I saw myself growing up, knowing no such sufferings as these. With always so much to eat, even servants feed their dogs. . . . Yet here farmers cannot eat their own products, for they need the money from the market. They tend the yams but dare not taste. They raise chickens, but must be content with wind in their stomach. And then, when they return weary from the market, the tax man is waiting with his bill. . . it could not be just. . . in our house, mama, we wake to the chorus of jingling coins. And when we sleep coiled springs, soft foam and felt receive our bodies gently. But I have lived in the forest among simple folk, sharing their pain and anguish. . . and I chose. . . (p. 66)

There is no doubt that words like these rely mainly on rote and are devoid of any concrete content. In fact the rather longish nature of such a ranted passage undermines the very essence of dramatic dialogue, rounded characterization, and the subtlety of portrayal that the playwright intends. Elsewhere, Paulo Freire has observed that such an easy verbosity could not be relied upon to develop a people's critical consciousness because it is "centered on words emptied of the reality they are meant to represent."⁷ In this instance, where the play exemplifies a forced reality, the illusion of the theater proffers itself as a living reality. None of the sociological implications of the ideas in the play could be pursued with plausibility since wishful projections of language have completely taken over aesthetic subtlety. This is the danger to which Erich Fromm points when he theorizes on the alienating principle in language. Expounding on the concept of alienation in Marxian thought, Fromm notes that man experiences alienation in many

forms, the most common of which is language. A situation arises in which a man speaks of an objective idea within him in words but mistakes the words he has spoken for the reality outside him. It is a situation in which as soon as the word is spoken,

it tends to assume a life of its own, it becomes a reality. I am under the illusion that the saying of the word is the equivalent of the experience. . . a temptation to confuse life with things, experience with artifacts, feeling with surrender and submission.⁸

The result is artless simplification.

Osofisan's more accomplished experiment will be found in his play, *Once Upon Four Robbers*.⁹ What the playwright does in this play is to tell a "moonlit night tale" through the medium of a raconteur, Aafa. Aafa is both the narrator as well as the rapporteur of this robust drama replete with songs, mime, and action. The pivot of action generates from the activities of four robbers in oil rich, corrupt Nigeria of the seventies. The military government had just promulgated a law that all convicted armed robbers would be shot by firing squad. The favorite spot for the sordid executions was the famous "bar beach." Worse still, there was always a surging crowd of "voyeurists" who make the barbaric killings look like a picnic. What the play does then is to reveal the workings of the robbers, their world-view, and their desire. Their interaction with the soldiery who shoot them, with merchants who fleece society, and with the audience portend some kind of open, fluid conversational tone. This, in a sense, opens up a dialogue between them and the audience because the familiar songs often echo in the auditorium.

For the flow of the play, Aafa sponsors the robbers, hoping that once he gives them the magical formula of riches, they will capitulate and repent from robbery. He gives them some magic words which, appropriately uttered, cast a spell on the wealthy merchants and render their wealth vulnerable. The proviso, however, is that the effective limit is reached when it has been used on three occasions. Then its spell and force will be spent. The last effective spell of the magical chants is employed for the last scene, and so the encounter between the robbers and the agency of state soldiers results in a stalemate. At this point the old man, Aafa, has to be brought in to ask the opinion of the audience in resolving the stalemate. This effectively puts up Aafa for the role of the dramatic ombudsman, and enables him to put a rounded finish to the play he began—the story he tells.

The unusual style adds a fresh dimension to Nigerian theater and springs the kinds of surprises or melodramatic turn of events that

stimulates a conscientizing medium. It might be interesting to quote a large portion of the epilogue that rounds off the play:

Aafa: (walking round the auditorium) A stalemate? How can I end my story on a stalemate? If we sit on the fence, life is bound to pass us by, on both sides. No, I need your help. One side is bound to win in the end. The robbers, or the soldiers who are acting on your behalf. So you've got to decide and resolve the issue. Which shall it be? Who wins? Yes. . . .

(He collects the views, making sure there is a full discussion, not just a gimmick, and then, just in case the house decides for the robbers, he says:)

Ladies and gentlemen, the robbers win!

(The robbers come out of their freeze and sing their song. Hasan frees Major. The robbers rob the dancers. . .The robbers start on the audience. . .who hurriedly begin to leave, as lights rise in the auditorium.

But in case the audience decides against the robbers, then the end is different. The robbers are all seized and tied up, in a scene of pantomime as in the PROLOGUE. Major, at the stake is blindfolded. Meanwhile the lights slowly fade to dawn light, as martial music begins. . .)

Apart from the few passages that lack dramatic motivation in the play, Osofisan's originality of style in this play is still the foremost in his dramaturgy. This is because the conscientizing medium is not forced, neither is it a string of ranted passages but a subtle interplay of ideas.

To conclude this section, we must point out one example of the recent critical orientations that have misled many intellectuals and their followers in Nigeria. It is often supposed by various Third World and radical critics that the term "popular theater" corresponds to any given theatrical vocation. Many often suppose that a theater which encourages gregarious, undefined roles and participation is a convenient substitute for Aristotelian theater of individualized heroism, or the pursuit of nobility and grand stature. The term "popular theater" has recently gained uncritical currency but has not been given any accredited definition or characteristic. Is it a theater that is accessible to the lower classes in terms of linguistic and cultural familiarity? Or is it a theater that attempts to grapple with progressive aspirations as it pertains to class, art, and culture? Or does it refer to communalist theater as is

found in festival or ritual? In other circumstances, will it qualify as an aspect of the agit-prop, or joint improvisation?

If, however, it corresponds to any or all of these, what then makes it popular theater? Or does gross participation and consumption correlate and with the popular in this sense?

A serious attempt to define what constitutes popular theater was first proposed in 1974 when the University of Manchester inaugurated a symposium to describe the concept. It is true that the attempt was narrowed down to define what can actually be described as popular within the theatrical tradition of the West, but the term is no less familiar in the theatrical practices of Africa. The exercise was worthwhile. David Meyer, in an important article on the concept, reaches the conclusion that it is not possible to define popular theater, it is only possible to describe what its properties are. He thus writes:

There are many things which may be said about "popular drama" or "popular theater," and one of these is that it is probably easier and more profitable to describe various popular genres than to define what we mean by the term "popular theater". I am uncertain that a definition is possible because a definition must aim at limiting, at fixing boundaries, at excluding apparent irrelevances, whereas our present experience with popular theater emphasizes the contrary. We are extending parameters and disproving former irrelevances.¹⁰

It is important also that David Meyer makes it clear in his essay that whatever may be termed popular theater is not likely to adopt the rigidity of a written script, and that popular theater is written to accommodate the tastes of the lower classes. By "the lower classes" he means the people with lower income per capita, lower level of formal education or literacy, lower knowledge of aesthetic criteria, and lower level of political awareness. As he emphasizes, these are likely to be peasants, factory hands, farmers, artisans, and the poor. "Their theater," he says, "are the boulevards, sports palaces, exhibition halls, fair-grounds, market places, shearing grounds, threshing floors, and forest clearings."

The above I consider to be a fair description especially as nothing in the description overtly elects the writer to the podium as a demagogue. A narrow, personalized content of intellectual experience is not likely to entertain such an audience anyway. One step further: the situation in which the middle classes of a nation do not invent, manufacture, or dictate the pace of aesthetic criteria in literature and art (no less in technology as well) certainly disqualifies them from legislating the artistic sensibilities of such a nation. Worse still, it is not

polite that members of such a class pretend to teach the masses of their own people about the legends and songs they have appropriated from the folk traditions created by the imagination of the same class of people they purport to instruct.

My point is that the confusion in social life reflects itself in the confusion of categories in art and ideas; and that in such anomic situations in which some Third World nations find themselves, their intellectuals are always in a dilemma as to how to fashion a true national culture. This is why the criticisms of their literatures, and indeed other critical attempts to articulate their culture, seem always to be largely in the hands of alien intellectual mediators.

II

Having discussed playwrights and their plays, it is only pertinent to examine the depths of the literary critics' endeavor in the situation, since both the playwright and the literary critic inhabit the same social sub-stratum. The former initiates the work of art gives it form; the latter interprets and re-moulds it, drawing together the various webs and patterns that give them fuller meaning within an anthropological context. I shall restrict myself to critics who may share mutually instinctive biases with the second generation of playwrights discussed above.

An impulsive, radical examination of the content (particularly) and form of African plays was conducted by Biodun Jeyifo in 1978.¹¹ He speculates on the emergent categories in contemporary African drama. There were signs that Jeyifo realized the dangers and the dilemma involved in the analysis of socio-politically engaging plays that he refrained, in spite of their popularity, from referring to them as "popular theater." He also speculates on why new critical norms often show inclination towards certain plays as opposed to others. In his own words,

certain plays deal exclusively with the political, social and cultural problems of the emergent elites, although some may in fact claim to speak for the whole nation, or the people, for all of Africa even. . . . Contrastively, another group of plays resolutely shuns the elite, their preoccupations and problems, and deals with workers, peasants, the urban and rural masses and their leaders and representatives. . . .¹²

It is useful to say that Jeyifo observes that his categorization is broad, but he also draws attention to the fact that "almost to a man,

African playwrights come from the educated, salaried stratum of the emergent national petty-bourgeois class, in love with, disillusioned with, or up in arms against their class." This is his own perception of the dilemma I discussed in the first section of this essay.

In a more subtle note, Jeyifo's essay undertakes a further breakdown of two contrastive categories forming the individual-society dialectic. The first generation of playwrights, an example of which is Wole Soyinka, places the responsibility of social vision on the wit or whim of the individual or personal destiny rather than on society or the group. Soyinka's characters are drawn with greater individualist poise, and they seek to conquer the problems of existence on the merits of individual moral conscience, or the singularity of vision or conviction. I do agree with Jeyifo in this analysis, as Soyinka has his own aesthetic and philosophical model, on which moral decisions and matters of principle are predicated. This is reflected in Professor in *The Road*, Baroka in *The Lion and the Jewel*, Emman in *The Strong Breed*, Elesin in *Death and the King's Horsemen*. It is true that it is for this reason that Western critics are able to ponder and pronounce on Soyinka's words, as Western bourgeois individualism (or even individuality) tends to frame the world against the mosaic of moral choice or heroic responsibility.

The second generation of Nigerian writers and literary critics are our focus however. They tend to have derived influence from the European avant-garde, are generally of the left, and they depict their heroes and characters as products of historical determinism rather than of rugged individualism. The important point that is of profound interest here, though, is that Jeyifo proceeds from contextual analysis to observations on method. He realizes, for instance, that Kole Omotoso's conclusion in *Shadows in the Horizon*¹³ does not convincingly arise from context and craft, but rather he sees it as something of a proleptic vision.

The dilemma I have harped upon is that the contents of some of our second-generation plays have yet to find adequate forms of expression. The projections are often forward-looking, and even overly revolutionary, but deductions made for the audience are often aborted by being overstated or grossly anticipated. In this way, the audience may empathize with the points made in the spectacle enacted, but it has the carpet drawn from under its feet before it has had the chance to take a stand.

A year after his "Patterns and Trends in Committed African Drama," Jeyifo wrote a more decisive article on the same theme in 1979—"Literary Drama and the Search for a Popular Theater in Nigeria."¹⁴ In this essay he speculates on ways by which literary drama could become authentically popular. He rightly argues that there need

not be a schism between the literary and the popular (if there is any such thing!), realizing that the common theater-goer in Aristophanes' days knew not only of Aristophanes but recalled lines from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as well. Indeed, the Elizabethan, Shakespeare himself, was not a university wit.

I do not doubt that Jeyifo has in his latter article attained a somewhat purer, more matured vision of art and of society. He therefore resolves his own critical and intellectual dilemma by affirming that there need be no disjunction between forms of art so classified as the *literary* and the *popular*. He emphasizes that "there is always a mutual borrowing and interaction between the literary and the popular."¹⁵ He believes, however, that the failure to realize a popular literary drama in Nigeria lies in the fact that our literary writers have not done a conscious delineation of their audience across the class divide. He writes:

The literary playwrights have not sufficiently clarified the issue of their audience, or the publics for which they write A popular literary drama will emerge only if, and when, there is a conscious wish for its emergence. But as we have remarked earlier, this aspiration exists in contemporary Nigerian literary drama only as an instinctive, unconscious and haphazard effort. . . . To the extent that the politics and economics of the present Nigerian society reflect indeterminacy and confusion about genuine economic and political autonomy and self-direction from foreign domination, and furthermore to the extent that "the people" is conceived as a vague category by the national ruling class in a populist political rhetoric which leaves most of the people abused, exploited and violated, to that extent will our present culture, art, literature and drama reflect indeterminacy and confusion.¹⁶

As a representative critic of the second generation, Biodun Jeyifo knows his tool; he identifies the problem, but I doubt that his conclusions follow from his diagnostic postulation. For one is immediately tempted to inquire: in what way does "the people" in the above context serve as the equivalent or symmetrical twin of "the popular"? It seems to me that the search for a popular theater (a critical genre or form) must synthesize along a certain theoretical line. The basis of a practice in literary typology must be graded or delimited. It would appear that Jeyifo does not vindicate such a synthesis in his analysis.

The so-called literary drama of Nigeria seems to me to be just in the process of discovering itself, of groping for a tradition by which it can be established within the theory and history of artistic practice in

Nigeria. The reason it misses the tastes of its audience, as Jeyifo and Clark have observed, is that it is still a half-child that needs to groom itself. It would appear that this is what J. P. Clark means when he writes that our literary drama ". . . has its heart right at home in Nigeria and its head deep in the wings of American and European theater!"¹⁷ Nigerian theater as a popular tradition has possibly not yet arrived!

It is also of interest to note that Yemi Ogunbiyi, in an article on Duro Ladipo,¹⁸ speculates on an example of what he thought might be a popular theatrical art of Ladipo. Methodologically, discussing a single, unilineal theme as its example helps the worthiness of a definition, but when a critic arrives at particulars through a generalized code, there is always a weakness. Ogunbiyi sees the Ladipo company as popular, not in the sense of a tradition but in the particular sense of the word "popular." He writes:

Rid of all the false elitism that has blighted the vision of otherwise committed young theater practitioners, the internationally known Duro Ladipo . . . remained at Oshogbo, basically to the end. For instance, every new play of his opened at Oshogbo first because the local Oshogbo audience was the *first* audience. They served as his barometer for testing out his works and like *the genuinely popular artist that he was*, he was willing to rework details that the local audience found unclear (My emphasis).¹⁹

The scope of Ogunbiyi's idea is broad and its implication wide-ranging almost to the point of diffusion. But it seems reasonably clear that he does not pretend to define a genre or a verified form in his use of the term "popular." Might we argue that a certain form of drama is "popular" because the dramaturge is eagerly sought after by the local audience in his own community? Or could it be argued that a dramatic tradition is adequate opium for a general mass of the population?

The controversy will rage for a while yet before theater history in Nigeria arrives at a stage when it can whelp a truly popular form or tradition backed up by theory and accepted foundations of practice. While Jeyifo is mistaken in supposing that a theater will become popular when it moves out from the universities into the street,²⁰ he makes a valid point in opining that the general audience must see their lives and aspirations reflected in our recent dramas. It is, of course, another question whether commentators and critics of our present time sufficiently understand society to become so magisterially in control of its art, its destiny. Suffice it to say that a lot of the theater we see on television screens outside the university are savage and, to borrow a word from Jeyifo, "misanthropic" representations of life. They rate just

below the trivia of the cowboy western. In this respect I do not exclude some of our best playwright-actors in the indigenous language, such as Jimoh Aliu or Toyosi Arigbabuwo.²¹

Craft must have the light of history or tradition to guide it, and that is when our modern, literary dramas would have their head and heart right here at home where they truly belong.

NOTES

¹Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1974), p. 32.

²Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1966).

³Ola Rotimi, *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1983).

⁴Ola Rotimi, *The Gods are not to Blame* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁵Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

⁶Femi Osofisan, *Morountodun* (Ibadan: Longman, 1982).

⁷Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 37.

⁸Eric Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederic Ungar, 1961), pp. 45-47.

⁹Femi Osofisan, *Once Upon Four Robbers* (Ibadan: Published Playscript, 1978).

¹⁰David Meyer, "Towards a Definition of Popular Theater," in David Meyer and Kenneth Richards, eds., *Western Popular Theater* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 257-77.

¹¹Biodun Jeyifo, "Patterns and Trends in Committed African Drama," in *Positive Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1978, pp. 23-26.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹³Kole Omotosho, *Shadows in the Horizon* (Beacon Books, published playscript, 1977).

¹⁴See Biodun Jeyifo, *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama* (London: New Beacon Books, 1985), pp. 78-89.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 8-86.

¹⁷See J. P. Clark, "Aspects of Nigerian Drama," in *The Example of Shakespeare* (London: Longman, 1970), p. 85.

¹⁸See Yemi Ogunbiyi, "The Popular Theater: A Tribute to Duro Ladipo," Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), pp. 333-353.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 337.

²⁰Jeyifo, *The Truthful Lie*, p. 87.

²¹Jimoh Aliu and Toyosi Arigbabuwo are leaders of two travelling theater troupes in Western Nigeria. The former is famous for his soap opera, *Arelu*, translated "Catastrophe" while the latter is known for his play *Sééré Ogun*, translated "The

Warrior's Rattle." Both plays demonstrate a penchant for inordinate, fiendish violence. They were both shown at the Oyo State Cultural Center in 1987.