

SENSE AND NON-SENSE AS IMAGING DEVICES IN POSTMODERN SCRIPTING: THE CASE OF OLA ROTIMI'S HOLDING TALKS

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Introduction

Sense implies a reasoned opinion or estimation attained by contemplation. This attitude is achieved via a reflective or perceptive channel of agreement between opposite paradigms. The compound word, non-sense, is symbolic of meaningless language, unnecessary behavior or pointless language or behavior. In medical parlance it connotes a contradictory use of mental images to try to ease pain or help in achieving a goal. Non-sense as a literary device has become a tool used by absurdist writers to confront and confound the meaningless nature of man's existence and give coherence to the babble littering man's bubble bath.

The sense datum of a word is the phenomenological reference of the denoted object while the non-sense element is attributive of a fragmented inference of the object's name. Going by this premise, the bumbling literary appurtenances of *Holding Talks* can be viewed hermeneutically as a deliberate intention to give meaning to the total picture of man's helpless state and incoherent stumble around the peripherals of the solution to his malady. If the general language used in the dramatic piece derives functional meaning from its thematic spine, then the nonsensical linguistics match the warped nature of the play's world.

Hugh Holfman observes that each historical age has produced plays conforming to the tastes of that period and society. This suggests that tragedy varies across ages and boundaries by reflecting the nature of that society's existence (24). A peculiar feature of postmodernism is its enigmatic nature reflected in its stylistic rejection of cores, having multifarious metaphors, adopting migratory language and bearing a focus on human essences, objectives, and complex characters. The postmodern concept, however, is not easily understood because of the variety and range of the works that shelter under its monstrosity. It is a period concept primarily existing to relate new emergent features in culture to the reality of social existence and economic order. According to Patricia Waugh:

What is new is the comprehensive nature of postmodern intertextuality: the recognition that we live in a world constituted through multiple kinds of discourse or language games that contradict and contest each other even as they complement and are constructed out of each other. Literary texts cannot be 'autonomous' in these terms, nor can 'theory' be seen to occupy a radically different order of discourse form that of 'fiction'. Postmodern theory and literature are thus seen to be caught up in a web of intertextual overlap, neither (to use Habermas's terminology) being purely 'world disclosing', nor 'problem solving', because both are seen to be part of a world in which such rigid distinctions have broken down. For Eagleton, this is a negative consequence of commodification, for others, like Foucault, it is

simply the logic of Enlightenment rationalism subverting its own contradictory foundations (121).

In criticizing the absurdity of man's existence and spot lighting man's manifest concern with trivial details and procedures, postmodern drama, like Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks*, offers new dramatic approaches through which realism's stake to critical ascendance can be questioned. This is succinct in determining what sort of language is meaningful and which diction is incoherent. By ridiculing man's penchant for corruption, religion, exploitation and meaningless debates absurdist writers present a platform for reflection of sociological and psychological dogma occasioned by an impractical world. Literature can only examine an ideology by embodying it so that if theorists can operate through reductive aggregates. Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism views knowledge of world, self and other, as always historically situated, relational, open-ended and perspectival, a process shifting through time and space with none of these categories is a self-sufficient construct, but a relational process-anchored in provisional and continuous 'authorships' (Waugh 112).

According to Encarta Encyclopedia,

the British scholar Martin Esslin first used the phrase "theater of the absurd" in a 1961 critical study of several contemporary dramatists, including Irish-born playwright Samuel Beckett and French playwrights Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. These writers reacted against traditional Western theatrical conventions, rejecting assumptions about logic, characterization, language, and plot... *Ubu roi* (1896; translated 1951), by French playwright Alfred Jarry, is considered an early example of absurdist theater for its use of nonsense language and mocking of theatrical conventions (n.p.).

Absurdist plays like the one under review focus on the world objectively and the incongruity of man's optimistic hopes for salvation. Rotimi with his witty keen sense of acerbic humour utilizes a farcical scenario which plays out in a barber's shop, to convince us into disputing conventional boundaries of rhetoric and linguistic structure. The interpretation of man's helplessness as contextual, cumbersome, and atrophying is achievable by a juxtaposition of stable and distorted language codes. Man's basic substance is comprised of conflicting parts seeking for centrality and the addition of nonsensical language further problematises mankind's woes as can be gleaned from the text,

APPRENTICE: Can we now take him to the –

MAN: Who will answer the questions?

APPRENTICE: Questions?

MAN: Yeah- When did he die? What killed him...jip-jap, jap-jasp, jip-jip,ja-jap, ji-ji-jap-jap- questions.(13)

Poverty, a major theme in the play is a collective assault on humanity and is depicted as such in its stark state by the demeanour of the majority of the play's characters and the décor of the play's setting. This situation is heavily emphasized by the writer who establishes Man's physical and psychological presence once he steps into the decrepit salon.

Sensible Non-sense

Holding Talks is an absurdist monstrosity, and one of Rotimi's least performed plays which from its publication thirty three years ago till date continually appears uniquely ahead in time and foreign to the Nigerian stage. In subject matter the play encompasses linguistic bric-a-brac, nonsensical bickering, debates and numerous 'argumentis plus plus' while calamity reigns supreme, but still makes positive contribution to critical discourse in our postmodern world. Since Rotimi wrote his absurdist piece, the Rwandan genocide, Darfur conflict, Ethiopian famine and other global economic tsunamis have passed under the creaking bridge while the world banter, shifting blames instead of taking vital steps to remedy mankind's collective woes. Like the archetypal Man in Rotimi's Holding Talks, people (especially the West) have engaged in unnecessary logicalities. The idea that a text can offer profound multiple meanings while appearing to be founded on structural gibberish is a logical conundrum which this investigation sets out to explore.

The play's principal theme is the futility of endless debates and arguments both at the domestic and international levels of society. The play's chief action is located at a Barber's shop. Man's entrance sets off a chain of arguments which culminate in Barber's slumping and eventual death. The arguments generated at steady intervals by Man never patter off but complicate to the finish when the perplexed inept Policewoman is harassed off stage by the confounding atmosphere of Man's intellectual debate which threatens her arrest. MAN moves into the salon and immediately dominates the space.

The play's opening scenic comments set the tone for the slow commencement of the dramatic action, ON THE BENCH AT THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SHOP, THE MASTER BARBER HIMSELF LIES FULL LENGTH FACE HEAVENWARDS, ASLEEP (1). This scene description suggests that Barber is trying to communicate with an inattentive creator. Barber denies Man's accusation that his hand shook as he was about to comb Man's hair and another round of argument ensues.

BARBER: No, sir... but my hand is not shaking, sir and that is the St. John's gospel truth.

MAN: In other words, my eyes deceived me.

BARBER: (instead of replying the question chooses an indirect axis) My hand never deceives me, sir(4-5).

Man presses on relentlessly like a hyena sensing an offering of carrion,

MAN: In other words, your hand didn't shake (4-5).

The use of the phrase 'other words' is a deliberate statement which reinforces the notion that sometimes formally approved words might not be adequately sensible to convey an intention. The affluent Man represents the elite who impetuously exploit the poor without remorse. The elite go to extreme lengths to derive satisfaction at the expense of the helpless inferior class. Man's insistence on Barber's physical exertion in order to determine the veracity of his earlier denial is wicked and cynical. The real life representatives of such character, Man, do worse.

MAN: There! (Releases the hand) Raise it
up...down...up...down...up...down...(faster)
hep...hap...hep...hap...hep...hap...stop!(7)

Arguments go on daily in people's lives and sometimes by benefit of hindsight appear trivial and unnecessary. The wrangling over unnecessary concerns impels the plot of the drama.

APPRENTICE: Music, sir?(without interrupting his humming , Man shakes his head.)

MAN: NO (1)

MAN: (points at standing fan) Is that maximum?

APPRENTICE: No, Sir, this is high, sir. Do you want maximum, sir?

MAN: Maximum, yes, try maximum.

APPRENTICE: Yes, sir. (Fumbles with knob again, turning it as far as it can go. Suddenly an effect)

BARBER: That is maximum, sir.

MAN: I see. Let him try high again, then. (2-3)

This brief exchange shows a compounded situation turned on its head where a supposedly lower setting on the control knob becomes preferable by practical considerations over the maximum position. Holding Talks is a dramatic invective parodying mankind's meaningless dissipation of energy on inconsequential discourses and fruitless confabs. These debating proclivities engaged in by authorities who rightfully should be involved in purposeful deeds are presented in the play as self serving, gratuitous and untenable in the face of a comprehensive alternative course. The dramatist adopts a mocking stance in reaction to this meandering diplomatic art and brutally denounces the sensibility behind such a reprehensible engagement by portraying a stereotypical arrogant male caught up in intellectual perambulation while another person's life wastes away.

The play's characterization is archetypal and representative of different segments of the society from the affluent 'country bumpkin', Man to the Barber, Apprentice, Press, Photographer, Police Woman, to the lowest dregs of the society, Master Beggar, Boy-Beggar. From the moment Man enters, he exudes an air of impetuosity. He asks Barber a puzzling question while Barber flounders for an answer. Suddenly, Barber falls down and passes out. Instead of Man cooperating with Apprentice to save the life of his master, he starts making recriminations about the Barber's denial of truth. The play at this point appears as if it is a disputation of the concept of truth tapering out when Apprentice displays an unwilling attitude to indulge in the argument but dragged into it all the same by Man's smooth handling of the subject matter.

Man's business in the salon appears suspicious considering that at the end of the day he doesn't get his hair cut nor his chin which is already smooth, shaved, neither is Man perturbed contrarily. Apprentice's sympathetic effort to assist is mocked by Man who portrays it as modicum and incriminating. Rotimi uses the device of nonsensical sounding diction to drive home sensible parodies and create emblematic imageries of God, poverty, the abusive elite and manipulative West, sensational minded media and incompetent police force.

Friedrich Frege states that for a term to have a sense without a reference, this requires that sense cannot be defined simply as the mode of presentation of the reference, as sometimes there is no reference being presented. Thus the view that the sense-reference

distinction solves the problem of empty names encourages the view that a sense is an individuating description that could be comprehended with or without a reference satisfying it. Bertrand Russell felt that most of the apparent proper names in English are in fact "disguised definite descriptions." Russell opines that Aristotle is not really a name, but is in disguised form just such a description. This is the case in *Holding Talks* where the thinly veiled archetypal names serve to pass descriptive comments on humanity. Russell continues to explain Frege's concept of sense and reference as signifying connotation and denotation. He goes a step further to apply a non-descriptivist interpretation of both terms highlighting the possibility that it is always possible to have a connotation without a denotation, which may not be the case with sense and reference. A given sense always determines the same reference, which might not be the case with connotation and denotation (Wikipedia n.p.).

Making sense of nonsensical sounding literature is tiresome and innovative in literary criticism. This is most evident when one is working on a realistic absolute whereas the text of reference is rooted on an absurdist grounds. Albert Camus extolled the idea of "acceptance without resignation" as a way of dealing with the recognition of absurdity, asking whether or not man can "live without appeal", while defining a "conscious revolt" against the avoidance of absurdity of the world (Encarta n.p.). Absurdity denotes a contrast between two worlds, the real and the suggested. Diffident man should come to terms with the fact that the universe will continue to be indifferent and abrasive to his survival. According to Wikipedia, the Online Encyclopedia,

Nonsense is a communication, via speech, writing, or any other symbolic system that lacks any coherent meaning. Sometimes in ordinary usage, nonsense is synonymous with absurdity or the ridiculous. Many poets, novelists and songwriters have used nonsense in their works, often creating entire works using it for reasons ranging from pure comic amusement or satire, to illustrating a point about language or reasoning. In the philosophy of language and philosophy of science, nonsense is distinguished from sense or meaningfulness, and attempts have been made to come up with a coherent and consistent method of distinguishing sense from nonsense. In the philosophy of language and the philosophy of science, nonsense refers to a lack of sense or meaning. Different technical definitions of meaning delineate sense from nonsense (n.p.).

The nonsensical nature of the text is a device used to engineer a philosophical debate which cannot be exhaustively attempted with normal dialogue. Rotimi's objective is to provide lucid enlightenment from the comparison of opposite classes represented by Man on one side and Barber, Apprentice etc., on the other side. Rotimi utilizes this incongruity to achieve his goal of conveying a higher state of interpreted reality on the part of the subject. The play is a critique of the western society. Rotimi ridicules western powers that supposedly give aids to developing nations but surreptitiously extract gain from exploitation of Africa's immense natural resources and supplying weapons of warfare. Man gives money to Beggar only to exploit him the very next minute.

MAN: I play my part. (casually MAN dips his hand into BEGGAR'S bag rummaging in it in search of something...MAN finds what he has been

searching for. Pulls it out of the bag: a bunch of three bananas. He yanks two bananas off the stalk, tosses the remaining one back.)(16)

Man's action signifies how low the rich and powerful can stoop to exploit the poor even to the degree of dipping into a dirty bag for aggrandizement.

Critics of Rotimi's absurdist play tend to concentrate on the rambling nature of the play and its concern with a proper realistic depiction of man's existence. The play which is existentialist in parts x-rays life's absence of meaning and the futility of a logical comprehension of man's foibles. This connection between the absurd and existentialist is particularly strongest in *Holding Talks* more than in other Rotimi's plays, for example, *IF...* The play is apolitical and explicit in tone towards unnecessary diplomatic meandering which it addresses through an appropriate parallel, nonsensical absurdity. According to Patrick Ebewo, "The changing and confusing characters in an absurd play who confront their public with

a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on, coupled with the gibberish language as a means of communication further remove the Nigerian audience from the absurd experience. Our audiences come to the theatre to see and hear what is meaningful...(159).

Ola Rotimi's play addresses the paradox of life especially the negative sort marketed by the kowtowing media which is motion without movement. His play is a paradigmatic tactic for confronting life under a tyrannical regime in this case, global politics and the media. The absurdity in *Holding Talks* stems from a misanthropic sense of communication, a miscommunication between characters who rightfully should be working together toward a higher purpose. The play achieves this element of characterization largely through a linguistic grasp of sensible jargon.

Ebewo extends his argument about the wieldy nature of the play thus, "There is a technical problem in using a barber's shop as the locale for the play. One of the major aims of the absurd theatre is to present the situation as it is in reality. One, therefore, questions the validity of this aim when it is an apprentice barber leafing through the pages of some tattered newspapers "- all of which report on TALKS - all species of TALKS" (157). The Nigerian audience is not naturally inclined towards absurdist plays and it appears Rotimi is simply challenging this audience to shake of its intellectual laziness and comprehend the absurdist existence of not only the Nigerian nation where government keeps making noise on the airwaves with numerous Federal Executive Council meetings, parliamentary sittings, confabs and conferences et al, all aimed at enhancing the Nigerian citizen's welfare yet at the end of the day his condition is not ameliorated but exacerbated. His demand is clear; refrain from this negative passivity which waits for a futile Godot to appear and take charge of matters. Man's fate is in his own hands not in the hands of any transcendental signified.

Nick Kaye seeks to rationalise the analysis of linguistic relationships which construct knowledge in a situation where the tools of such evaluation are another set of linguistic relationships which to him can not claim more authority than the former. He conceives postmodernism as a continued elaboration of the sense of living in an unstable world where security, or knowledge, or identity, may seem to be available, if at all, through the modes of the aesthetic rather than those of pure or practical reason. As he observes,

The 'modernist' project rejects the past precisely because it can be read, understood and so transcended, the postmodern self-consciously 'replays' images of a past that cannot be known, but that can only be constructed and reconstructed through a play of entirely contemporary references to the idea of the past". If, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, parody might be considered 'a perfect postmodern form', then perhaps performance may be thought of as a primary postmodern mode. Where the postmodern in art, literature and performance is identified with a disruption, with instabilities precipitated by a challenge to the 'totalising' capacity or the terms in play, then the postmodern might be best conceived of as something that happens (Nick Kaye 15).

The social creation of order and chaos to Rotimi is best handled by a nonsensical dialectic. The play's absurdity connotes the conflict between mankind's penchant for futile value and meaning in life. "The universe and the human mind do not each separately cause the Absurd, but rather, the Absurd arises by the contradictory nature of the two existing simultaneously (Wikipedia n.p.). Religion has failed man and the nonsensical language Rotimi offers Man a platform to ridicule religion. The concept of salvation is derided as he quotes the bible indirectly.

MAN: He refused. He heard a voice. The voice of salvation, of succor and assurance...a still small voice, if you please, a still, small voice calling out from the burning bush of unfettered altruism. But he hearkened not...(in heavy preacher's cadence) come...come unto me, and I will give you rest. .. (Apprentice prostrates himself full length in apology. MAN is disgusted.) Oh, for Heaven's sake, stop groveling in search of me down there in the dust, man, I'm up here, stand up. (10&23)

MAN continues to rail against religion and the supreme deity,

MAN: No wonder the big MAN Himself doesn't listen much these days...(28)

The concept of death and the different types of intellectual doom awaiting man is described in words like 'dead as mud,' 'dead-dead,' 'iron dead,' 'door knob dead' etc. The play explores man's dehumanization as Man indulges in self adulation and subservience of the lower class and lampoons the racist attitude of western nations who seem to be helping the underdeveloped nations.

MAN: America! Now, America, my boy is a land where monkeys work and baboons eat: slaved for by Africans, the whites now prosper in it.

Rotimi's critical gaze falls on the media which he submits to the acerbic point of his pen by ridiculing the press's infatuation with sensational negativity and vulgarities.

MAN: (Raises Barber's arms up. Photographer takes a shot of the armpit). Too bad cameras can't record smell!

Policewoman, a symbol of the corrupt Nigerian police force, who should have taken action becomes initiated into this cycle of inertia and reveals the crass ineptitude of law enforcement agents.

Conclusion

A society's aesthetic sensibility is a constant quality which is prone to change. Sometimes the trending ability of a style might vaporize within months while some might have the rare luck

to remain in vogue for up to a year. In recognizing a society's popular tastes, just like the advertising medium, the theatre can accentuate the acceptable values to serve the society a harmonious cocktail of what it needs with what it demands. As Jameson says:

But what would happen if one no longer believed in the existence of normal language, or ordinary, speech, of the linguistic norm (the kind of clarity and communicative power celebrated by Orwell in his famous essay, say)? One could think of it in this way; perhaps the immense fragmentation and privatization of modern literature - its explosion into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms (Brooker 21).

A peculiar feature of postmodernism is its enigmatic nature which is reflected in its stylistic rejection of cores, themes of multifarious metaphors, adopting migratory language and bearing a focus on human essences, objectives, and complex characters. The postmodern concept is not easily understood because of the variety and range of the works that shelter under its monstrosity. It is a period concept primarily existing to relate new emergent features in culture with the reality of social existence and economic order and evolving basically in reaction against a modernist principle that was essentially rational based and subversive (Peter Brooker 164-165). The recommending quality of the postmodern interpretation of texts and performances is its avoidance of the monotheist interpretation of text and performance and tolerance of multiple levels of interpretation. Every dramatic theory or performance theory should be concerned with current issues and events with the knowledge that applying outmoded conventions to discover a play's true meaning is a ruinous and pedantic exercise. A postmodern Nigerian theatre should reflect the spirit of its time.

Every age in narrating the tragic story of a character in the society has produced theatrical conventions complementary to the soul of its socio-political and cultural period. As Christopher Norris points out:

How can language be at once the most 'rigorous' and the most 'unreliable' source of knowledge? In what conceivable sense can man 'transform' himself through a process of naming somehow made possible by this rigorous unreliability? Beneath all the age-old conflicts of critical method there has always existed a tacit agreement about certain conventions or rules of debate, without which (supposedly) no serious thinking about literature could be carried on. That literary texts possessed meaning and that literary criticism sought knowledge of that meaning- a knowledge with its own proper claims to validity- were principles implicit across the widest divergence of thought (xi).

Rotimi has handled the national and global subject of endless talks and debates in the absence of any real action through a mixture of irony and comparison, resulting in a work with traditional conventions displaced and distorted. He has focused on the linguistic attribute of sensory expansion which he has expanded to explicate the role of the media and law statutes to confound an already chaotic space. He has validated these images by means of

nonsensical linguistic devices which elicit the memory and question the meaninglessness of man's existence. In this way, Rotimi has created extra-human reality to critical interpretation through his radical literature which provides a new type of language to dramatic construction. This post modern style is innovative and refreshing and should be copied by Nigerian playwrights who have shown a lacking sense of experimentation and fear by supposedly deciding what they think the Nigerian audience would or would not like. It is the writer's belief that the Nigerian audience should not be left out of the global mainstream of contemporary staging conventions which though not all inclusive but largely subjective.

Rotimi provides keen mastery and feeling of human life. His characterization technique and keen handling of dramatic diction focuses on man as object rather than subject of literary inquiry. His dramatic ruse in creating a somewhat superman who is extraordinary in relation to ordinary characters like Barber, Apprentice etc., is systematically contrived to show the way the larger than life (Western) man exploits the lesser (African) man intellectually and economically. In putting these two societies on a comparative level, Rotimi has transmitted an impression of the qualities and attitudes people ought to exhibit in an abnormal world like ours. His lexicon is nonsensical but extensively intelligible in this incoherent realm.

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