

CHARACTER AND THE BURDEN OF THE PAST : A STUDY IN THEMATIC CENTRALITY AND MARGINALITY IN BODE SOWANDE'S TRILOGY

Abstract

This work examines the concepts of character and characterization in the plays of Bode Sowande. The aim is to introduce new critical parameters that would depart from the issue of revolutionary aesthetics which critics often ascribe to his works. This critical concern lends itself to a better understanding of the matter and manner of the playwright by arguing that his plays are populated by characters propelled by the past to champion social goals.

Emmanuel Obiechina (1982) once observed that; "The African reader-the ultimate consumer of the African Literary Product-has grown quite sophisticated of late and has come to want more than a short story from the writer" (163). In another instance A.N. Akwanya (1998) describes this critical appreciation as "...a form of expansion enabling the reader to play the role of both the authorial and the narrative audience" (109). Extending Obiechina and Akwanya's views we can argue that a critic whose attention is restricted to the ideological or thematic leanings of a playwright stands the possibility of being incapable of deriving pleasure from the work. This is because the work could have been constructed on different principles, thus leading the critic to merely render superficial analysis of the content and form of the plays being analyzed. In using different kinds of plot design, many playwrights attempt to ensure that meaning and emphasis occur not just at one point but are extended to such elements as character, diction, dramatic activity and thought. In this paper, we shall take Akwanya's authorial audience to refer to works that align themselves with meaning as espoused by the playwright while those that depart from the intentions of the playwright come under the appellation of narrative audience. This work shares a critical homology with the approach of Akwanya's narrative audience. Although Obiechina's view is inspired by the African

novel and Akwanya's devoted to discourse analysis, they provide us with good examples of the sophistry of the critical appreciation of literary works in modern Africa of which dramatic literature is one of the major branches.

Taking our cue from Obiechina and Akwanya we can speculate that the sophisticated reader of a work of drama, therefore, would probably be in the habit of not just enjoying the resolution of the conflict, but of being curious about the larger ramifications of whatever cluster of facts that answers each dramatic question. Today research studies have shown that the plots of many plays are often not simply organized around a particular theme, or populated with characters propelled by a particular fixated emotive force. Studies of such critical vigour look out for other interests, themes and motivations which dramatic works of this nature might be offering beyond what the playwright would want us to believe. It is this critical parameter that would be applied in the study of characterization in the plays of Bode Sowande.

The works of Sowande have yielded much critical material that bears the badge of Marxist criticism. This is as a result of the structural and thematic features of the plays which celebrate the ideal of mass violence and revolution. Hence most scholars still do not see any other artistic vision beyond the Marxist/Hegelian dialectics advanced by pioneer critics of his plays. This paper is an attempt to question themes that have been considered recurrent and central to the plays of Sowande and examine them in the light of contemporary realities. In most studies on the playwright, the character of the radical hero commands much attention. This putative image often casts him as an individual motivated by social goals to actualize an egalitarian and just society. These critical conclusions are quite visible in the works of Robert Frazer (1979), Inih Ebong (1985), John Obasikene (1986), Niyi Osundare (1990), Chris Dunton (1992), Udentia O. Udentia (1994), Emeka Nwabueze (2003) among others. Our aim here, however, is to suggest that the burden of the radical's past rather than social duty propels him to embark on the course of social change. This argument is underscored by the fact that most of politico-philosophical habitus and persona which these characters

pontificate have become mere evanescent marginalia in contemporary democratic equation. This scenario becomes more evident with the demise of communism and the bipolar bellicosity of the cold war which engendered diametric ideals such as the intellectually consummate self righteous but marginalized radical and the mendacious establishment. The critical preoccupations advanced so far will be approached through the examination of characterization in Bode Sowande's *The Night Before, Farewell to Babylon* and *Flamingo*.

Character portraiture in these plays can be reduced to three critical kinds. These are the pro-establishment, the anti-establishment and the liberal perspectives. It is this multi-faceted delineation of character that gives the plays of Sowande the polemic and revolutionary colour. In employing our critical design, we intend to investigate the vicarious motives and fleeting factors that shaped the vision and outlook of the radicals in these plays leading them to equate personal fears occasioned by past experiences to collective need.

Our analysis begins with *The Night Before*. The plot of the play revolves around five young people on the eve of their graduation from the university. In a palm-wine drinking bar they reminisce on their experiences as students and share their hopes and fears for the future. As a protest play, *The Night Before* is quite static in bold dramatic activity and employs a grand verbose design in projecting its thematic concerns. The structure of the play does not project any single individual for analysis as the main character. Rather what one is confronted with is a set of five new university graduates on the eve of their graduation. These characters are Moniran, Onita, Nibidi, Moye and Dabira. However, it is Onita particularly that deserves critical searchlight. This is because he appears to be the only character whose past experience shaped his personality more profoundly in this first play of the trilogy.

The first scene of the play opens in an open-air drinking bar with Monira, Nibidi, Onita and Dabira. Moniran and Nibidi open the avalanche of reminiscing with this nostalgic salvo,

MONIRAN: And this is the night before tomorrow. We shall all go down the hall, march up the stage and receive our degrees.

NIBIDI: That was why I laboured all these years, moulding, shaping, and keeping these fingers trimmed to make confident builders of them. The world waits. The world waits for me, the new architect! She waits for me (9).

These recollections of past events give the reader significant insight into the past of the characters and illuminates some of the past events, circumstances and individuals that influenced them on the course of action which they are about to undertake as they graduate. It is also in the reminiscing that one evinces the great burden of fear, uncertainty and hope, which the characters harbour.

Onita first discloses an event that influenced and changed his personality permanently. This was the attempted assassination of the Vice-Chancellor by a student nick-named TKA in Onita's first year in the university. This incident made a deep impression on the psyche of Onita, and Moniran to a lesser extent. Onita invokes it as the singular incident in the university that set him on the course he is about to chart after graduation.

MONIRAN: On that fateful day we were in the hall.

ONITA: TKA's knife gleamed and he prepared for the first coup ever in a university campus. 'Cut down the head' he cried. Among us in the hall...We were freshers. He was a second year. 'Who was this man with a knife?' Cut down the head, he shouted, and ran down the hall to the stage where the Vice-Chancellor stood...It was then...that moment that my mind touched TKA and I said brother, I am with you. We must smash this Babylon...it was that moment that I knew... (10-11).

This burden of the past on Onita is further highlighted by Monira in his repudiation of Nibidi's hedonistic inclinations thus,

- NIBIDI: [Thoroughly impatient] Will you stop this nonsense! What are we here for anyway? Is it not to celebrate?
- MONIRAN: We need the past, Nibidi. He especially [meaning Onita] since that thrust of the knife, something in Onita yielded (11).

In response to the above views of Moniran, Nibidi thinks Onita 'to be mad'. He sees Onita as an eccentric who allowed himself to be held hostage by his past. Hence he deprives himself of celebrating life's achievement such as their graduation.

Onita's fight with his past looms throughout this play and haunts him to the extent that he dreads the future, seeing it as needing to be wrestled from those he feels have misappropriated it, "The past is like a ghost that haunts me with malice" (25). In their recollections of the past, the characters indulge in chanting slogans they learnt from their Marxist lecturers without questioning their relevance to their local situation. Onita and Moniran memorize these ideological slogans and find in them appropriate tools to wage the war against the establishment. The burden of the past on Onita and Moniran influences their vision of society as well as their future. As a result of their past, they view society and the establishment with great caution and suspicion. They see nothing good or positive in it. Hence Onita posits, "What awaits us is what frightens me... Now what do we expect for the future? We have been behind the gates of the university these past years..." (20).

Despite his seeming solitude, Onita harbours sexual fantasies, which soon manifest in the knowing welcome of Ibilola's company. In having sexual designs on Ibilola who already had a boy friend, Onita betrays the unstable and ambiguous personality that animates the mask of the social crusader of morals and values. Towards the end of the night he earnestly seeks to have a sexual encounter with Ibilola, and sees it as the ultimate triumph of his sojourn in the university. Unlike Nibidi and Dabira who dream of conquering the outside world, Onita dreams of

conquering Ibilola. Through his sexual desires, Onita strikes us more as someone who lives for the present and the now. In fact the desire to have Ibilola is all consuming that it becomes the primal goal for Onita and a balm to soothe the depressing image of the past,

ONITA: Will these spirits never mate?... This is our last night together. Let me shed this burden. Let us go into the night and the dew will wash us anew; cleanse us of this place... (31).

Onita sees the horizon of hope and redemption in Dabira's girl Ibilola. He does not pause to ponder on the implications of his actions, but rather condemns those he sees as subverting social values.

Apart from Onita, Moniran is also a character whose outlook and vision have been shaped by his past. He contested for the presidency of the Student Union and failed despite the fact that he saw himself as a better candidate (20). After much regurgitation with Nibidi he confesses, "I don't know what I want" (15). This profound failure haunts Moniran twelve years later and leads him to join ranks with the very social forces he fought against in the university in the questionable belief that he could confront it from the inside. One could infer here that Moniran's action is symptomatic of the aphorism 'if you can't beat them, you join them'.

Unlike Moniran and Onita, Nibidi does not share the nostalgic apprehension of the past nor does he think that it harboured any incident worth treasuring. He asks, "Why this heaviness in the atmosphere! What is wrong with everybody tonight?... I hate this kind of atmosphere. Put away the past!" (14). Nibidi is not burdened by the past as much as he is consumed with the thought of a boisterous future. On the other hand, the burden of the past leads Moniran to dissuade Nibidi from this vision of the future (15). The vicarious influence of the past on these characters is played out in *Farewell to Babylon*.

Farewell to Babylon is the second of the revolutionary trilogy written by Bode Sowande. The plot shows the characters in *The Night Before* in their bloom in their chosen professions in the outside world. Nibidi and Monira work for the government while Onita charts the

course of a radical and anti-government element. In *Farewell to Babylon*, Moniran occupies a marginal place as a radical or hero. These qualities belong to Onita. At the beginning of the play Kaago and Moniran drill Jolomi, a female state secret service agent, on the act of subterfuge. Her mission was to infiltrate the farmers' rank and reveal their leaders and tactics so that the government forces can overcome them. Meanwhile security officials, who are getting increasingly impatient with Onita's uncooperative attitude, interrogate him in prison over his association with the farmers. Like *The Night Before*, *Farewell to Babylon* presents characters whose personality and disposition have been influenced by their past. Moniran is a man haunted by the past. It is this personal torment that sets him on the part of working and undermining the system which he has hitherto fostered and is its chief of security. It is this past that compels him to restrain Kasa in his frequent irascible request to crush the rebellious farmers by force. To Kasa's request he says, "You must avoid a messianic posture. Those who did in the past produced abortions. Don't pretend to be messiahs of this nation. There is a dream and there is a reality" (69). Subsequent events in the play show that the dream which Moniran talks about is the dream fashioned during their days in the university. This dream revolves around creating a society of their own kind devoid of all manner of social vice. It is the inability to realize it that leads Moniran to join the establishment with the hope of changing it from the inside while Onita in adopting the rebellious disposition hopes to change it from the outside.

Moniran lives a dual life of pro-establishment and anti-establishment. In serving the government, he seeks to bring down the government. In political parlance he could be termed a 'mole' his words betray this fact, "I am in hell and I know it, but it is only to fetch fire and burn Babylon" (65). The Babylon referred to here is the Nigerian state and its complex of political and military rulers. The choice of Babylon could be traced to Biblical antecedents. Moniran as head of the state secret service encounters Onita in jail. This meeting enkindles old memories of the past. In an exchange of words Onita bemoans the fact that Moniran has abandoned the idealism which both of them shared in

the university to work for the government. Onita laments, "We shared dreams to destroy Babylon! And you went and joined them! Not only that, their security- to crown it all, as the boss" (67).

During his interrogation by Moniran and Kaago, Onita re-echoes the past idealism and experiences shared with Moniran (78,81). Throughout the encounter between Moniran and Onita, the latter genuinely sees the former as a saboteur and a tyrant. Moniran does not give away any sign of his intention to undermine and bring down the government. He leads Onita to believe that he was sincerely working for the perpetuation of the establishment, which Onita sees as corrupt and tyrannical.

In his recount of an encounter with one of his inquisitive female students before his arrest, the ghost of Onita's past rears its head again in the play. The sexual weakness that led to the fiasco of their graduation night manifests as he narrates his escapade to his cellmates. It is instructive that his journey to the farmers' camp began with his vow to resist the female species and concentrate on his idealism,

Oh no, I am still virile, but now I want other things. Wholesome things. The streams of all moralities must run to the same ocean of an ideal. I stopped my car, gave her a signed copy of the book. Goodbye girl, and tell your kind to get out of my life...I started the car and drove towards Abule, to see the farmers (93).

Onita does not yield to the temptation of the opposite sex this instance but rather succumbs to the temptation of solitary life. He sees this as an opportunity that would enable him to re-evaluate and crystallize his vision of an alternate social system. His rejection of the university and allying himself with the farmers, presents the trait of a man suffering from what R.D Laing (1976) refers to as "temporary state of dislocation of self". He describes it thus, "...most people who find themselves enclosed within a threatening experience from which there is no physical escape...the only way out was by a physical withdrawal into oneself" (78). At the climax of his inquisition by Cookie and Yulli in the cell,

Onita chastises his past in the following terms: "Of my past, of my damnable fornications, of my urinations during my meditations of the Buddha, I have nothing to offer you" (96-7). Cookie, the condemned murderer takes up this refrain of reminiscing and lets us into what led to his incarceration, putting the blame squarely on the Field Marshal,

With friends I went into music, to sing of protests...
Through friends the Field Marshal set me up. Each member of my former music combo now plays for the Field Marshal's state band. Each rides a posh car. I was set up. Put in jail and deprived of my trumpet (98).

Likewise, Jolomi at the end of the play declines to participate in the new government. She also spurns Moniran's proposals of a more intimate relationship because of the deep hurt, which past events etched on her psyche. She laments, "I was used. You used me. History, I hope will not talk of me as the Scarlet Woman, the harlot of Babylon, but as Rahab, the harlot of Jericho. That is my consolation" (126).

The last play of the trilogy, *Flamingo*, is also a construct of the major characters' pasts. Like we find in *The Night Before*, a singular recount of the past draws personal reflections from the other characters. A thorough analysis of this pattern shows that these plays are built on the past of the characters identified as either radicals or the establishment. These pasts had profound influence on them and set them on the course of their actions in the plays.

As *Flamingo* begins, Madam Funwotan recalls what she went through to secure the release of her brother the Brigadier after the revolutionary coup executed by Moniran and other security forces in *Farewell to Babylon*. That experience convinced her that the most potent way to get things done is through commercial prayer hawkers such as Prophets and Aaafas and not through equity and justice (8). In the same vein, Aiyemikoya, her friend laments her period of imprisonment in England for smuggling. These two women are haunted by their past, which emboldens them and sets them out as individuals who would do anything to avoid a repeat of the past. They see in Kasa the new Head of

State, a malleable individual who can be seduced by their benighted sycophancy. The process of actualizing this dream leads the women to seek Nibidi's assistance as an influential member of the ruling junta.

In *Flamingo*, the hope of an egalitarian society that would be ushered in by the change in government through a revolution becomes a mirage. Moniran, disillusioned, becomes a recluse. He resigns from the secret service and devotes his time to growing vegetables in a village. Soon after the coup that brought Kasa to power Moniran discovers that he was now a pawn and prisoner to the state. This is made very apparent to him when he threatens to resign his job as the head of state security services. Kasa, the Head of State, confronts him with this fact, "You cannot resign. Chief of Security, resign at this time? You are a Brigadier, by your military rating...don't you know what that means, Mr. Chief of Security? You belong to the state until we let you go" (25).

Despite these threats, Moniran goes ahead and resigns from the state security service. In the village Teriba is secretly planted by the state to keep an eye on his activities. Try as he could, he fails to convince Moniran to confide in him. The weight of the past on Moniran is vividly presented to us in the following lines, "I am done with giving too much of myself to cowards, weaklings and traitors. It is too late to start life again. And I really don't know why you insist" (30).

Moniran felt betrayed by a government and a system he worked assiduously to enthrone. In deciding to release corrupt politicians and soldiers, Kasa betrays the very foundation of the revolution he planned and executed with Moniran in *Farewell to Babylon*. In an attempt to shut himself out from the past permanently, Moniran refuses to read newspapers or listen to the radio. He sees his new state as a state of "Nothingness" (30). By adopting the escapist method, Moniran appears to be running away from his past. He explains his actions in the following terms, "I run from the predators who now fill the power centers. Teriba, my mistake was to organise a coup. Coups change only the heads, while the structure decays and festers. When I realised my sin against history, I fled the predators of power" (31). Teriba soon realises the extent of Moniran's loath of his past and points this out to the Head of Police: "He

does not talk of the past. I am not happy with staying in that place...he often talks alone, or sits for long without talking like a man labouring with regrets" (40).

Nibidi's visit aggravates Moniran's battle with his past as the former taunts him with the various misadventures of his days as the head of state security services. The death of Onita in the government cell when Moniran was still the head of security, his marital status and the fate that befell Jolomi in *Farewell to Babylon* serve as appropriate butts for Nibidi's verbal vendetta (44-45). The verbal attack sets Moniran on the path of regret and self-pity. This personal regret and disillusionment forms the spine of Moniran's encounter with his past. It is an encounter, which changes his personality and redefines his relationship with society, family and God.

In rejecting society and his biological roots, he sees his vegetables as his new relations and family. Moniran vouches for his new aversion for human confidants, and confesses to having lost God in the course of his career in the state security department, "I don't trust anybody. Not now. But I would have wanted God to know, but I lost him somewhere along the line. I put too much faith in human nature" (32). Moniran hopes to rediscover God in his new vocation, "I am sure that somewhere in the seeds, in the soil, and these vegetables, God will claim back my remains" (32). He finds peace in his vegetables and confides this fact to Yulli the student leader who came to the village to urge him to return to the city and lead a new revolution.

In his new reclusive life Moniran's personality parallel's Onitas in *Farewell to Babyon*. It is a personality akin to a state of suspended neurosis, a way of avoiding non-being by avoiding being. P. Tillich (1952) puts it succinctly in the following words: "The trouble is that the individual may find that the presence has been in the pretending and that in a more real way than he had bargained for, he has actually lapsed into that very state of non-being he has so much dreaded, in which he has become stripped of his sense of autonomy, reality, life, identity" (111). Unlike Onita, Moniran takes effective action to deal with the ghost of his past. In abandoning his method of changing the system from the inside

he breaks with the past effectively. Onita on the other hand lives the linear live of an outsider until death. His life in *The Night Before* and *Farewell to Babylon* is one dimensional and stereotyped. He is presented as an iconoclast who lacks the multidimensional vision of a well-read man, which he was cut out to be in the play. He never paused to weigh the implications of some of his actions and utterances choosing rather to see things always from the prisms of good and bad. For him there could be no center. It is this indiscretion that finally led to his death at the hands of a deranged cellmate. If Onita had found himself in Moniran's shoes as the head of state security, he probably would have had him executed for subversive activities. Moniran, the ever articulate and two-dimensional character acted the true well-rounded personality who thinks before he acts. It is not therefore surprising that unlike Onita he moves with the plots of the three plays and evolves most of all the characters in the trilogy. His affirmative reply to Teriba's urgings to return to the state security attests to this evolution of personality when he says, "I simply have chosen a new direction, and I admit" (32).

So far we have tried to highlight the influence of the past on the characters of Sowande. The paper has articulated a theme rooted in the psyche and experiences of the main character that populate his plays by arguing that the past is a formidable genie that fashioned the persona of the radical characters. Unlike studies that advance the course of the oppressed radical on a messianic mission we urge for an alternate view that is considered marginal but which when approached from the crucible of the characters' past cast doubt on factors that motivate them to champion the course of the oppressed masses. Thus we can also surmise that both the radical and the establishment often operate from the same hindsight of experience and thus are motivated by the same need for self or class preservation occasioned by the past. Today one can speculate with some measure of confidence that the theme of the radical Marxist and social revolution which commanded a critical centrality could be reclassified in this era of ultra individualism and democratic ethos. By the same token the seemingly marginal theme of the character's past could be raised to a critical pedestal of centrality.

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