

INUA ELLAMS' *THE 14TH TALE* AND THE CONCEPT OF THE OUTSIDER

Uche-Chinemere Nwaozuzu

Department of Theatre and Film Studies

University of Nigeria Nsukka

Abstract

*This paper examines the phenomenon of deviancy which finds adequate parallels in many Nigerian Drama. These are characters of oddity and self-indulgence, who society often see as different, eccentric or a special kind of person. To investigate these personages, we have appropriated the concept of the Outsider. The Outsider in modern Nigeria milieu often speaks for himself and sometimes the community, the down trodden masses, the oppressed and moves them to look at their circumstances critically. Using Inua Ellams *The 14th Tale* we shall attempt to argue that this character is often fiercely individualistic solitary and iconoclastic*

Keywords: Outsider, 14th Tale, Inua Ellams

Introduction

African art, the drama especially has experienced rapid growth in recent times. This growth means an expansion of the stylistic and thematic possibilities open to it. Various themes have been explored in a variety of ways but one noteworthy theme that has been taken up by playwrights in an archetypal manner is the theme of the Outsider. Critics of drama have unfortunately given this theme an oblique attention. This neglect is what this study intends to cater for with special reference to the Inua Ellams' solo drama, *The 14th Tale*. In the words of Robert Stevens:

All social groups or communities make rules and attempt to enforce them. Social rules, define situations and kinds of behaviour appropriate to them. When a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person. One who cannot be trusted by the rules agreed on by the establishment is regarded as the Outsider (29).

Conceptual Framework

Defining the term Outsider, William Frazer talks of the Outsider as "a crusader who is anti-establishment" (42). Judith MacCrow in her book *Social Deviants*, sees the Outsider as a crusader who sees his mission as a 'holy one' and feels that nothing can be right in the community until rules are made to correct them (9). Edward Rowland, in his book *The Outsider in Our System*, talks of the Outsider as a man who is usually alienated from his immediate relatives or the entire society because what he preaches involves a total change from one way of life to another (76). From the above definitions, we deduce the fact that the sociologically, the Outsider often operates with an absolute ethic. What he sees in the society is truly and totally evil with no qualification. Consequently, any means is justified to do away with it. As we shall try to argue later, this Sociological view of the Outsider is closely related to its' literary connotation.

We can trace the first allusion to the Outsider to ancient Egypt. Peter Calvert in his studies of the outsider made mention of Menes the man who led the rebellion against the immorality of the Hyksos shepherd kings of the ancient Egypt and united the Northern and the Southern kingdoms circa (3,400 B.C). Howard Becker in his book, *Outsider: Study in the Sociology of Deviance*, traces the development of the term over the ages. In his views, the Outsider is always the product of the social,

political, religious and economic contradiction found in his society (34). To Tony Bilton et al, “the society’s direct experience or contact with the Outsider is often highly limited .Yet, despite this, the reaction to them is invariably one of disapproval, fear, suspicion or hostility” (447). They go on to say that the Outsider is disturbing because he disrupts our picture of reality by behaving in a way which questions our expectations of what normal people do. In the above views by Bilton et al, we see that sociologically, the Outsider is often seen as a political crusader or a product of social contradictions in his society.

In dramatic literature, the Outsider often comes as a rebel, an outcast, the alienated intellectual, the misanthrope or the cynic as Richard Taylor seeks to show in his brief allusion to the archetype in African(7). The defining of the Outsider in Drama in the words of Henrik Ibsen includes an altruistic and corrective crusader for social re- examination (12). Frequently rejected, the dramatic Outsider is branded an extremist by people who do not want him. He is often derisively recommended for or actually sent to the asylum as is the case of Dedan Khimati in Ngugi Wa Thiong’O and Micere Githal Mugo’s play *The Trail of Dedan Khimati*, and Oba Ovonramwen in Ola Rotimi’s *Ovanramwen Nogbaisi*.

Another defining characteristics of the Outsider in drama in the words of J. Cohen is that he is often seen as “a meddling busybody interested in forcing his own morals on others”(30). This definition in view of this study is however narrow. Many Outsiders have strong humanitarian overtones. They are not only interested in seeing to it that other people do what they think is right. They believe that if they do what is right, it will be good for them and for the society or they may feel that their reform will prevent certain kind of exploitation of one person by another as is the case in the plays that will be examined in this work.

Chinyere Nwahunanya , in her seminal work entitled “The Outsider in West African Fiction”, talks of the Outsider as a selfless and corrective crusader for social redirection which arises from the fact that the society is sick with corruption and operates an ethic which is morally objectionable (30). This view by Nwahunanya best encapsulate our conception of the term in this study, yet it would not be out place for us to add one more feature to the defining characteristics of the Outsider, the tendency to be an idealistic moral crusader who seeks for elusive values which nevertheless are not altogether impossible. These views are also partly true of the Outsider in dramatic literature. We say that it is partly true because unlike the literary outsider, the sociological Outsider can be motivated by other factors apart from altruistic and moral issues. Mark Wartson argues in his book, *The Social Deviance* that:

A person who is labeled an Outsider may have a different view of the matter .He may not accept the rule by which he is being judged and may not regard those who judge him as either competent or legitimately entitled to do so. Hence a second meaning of the term emerges .The rule breaker may feel that his judges are Outsiders (47).

A critical examination of Wartson’s view, brings out the fact that in Sociology, the Outsider can either be the altruistic moral crusader or the unstable lunatic. It can also be seen from the perspective of the oppressor who is seen as the Outsider by the oppressed. In literature, Socrates, the classical Greek Philosopher could be said to be the first known Outsider (Clement, 139). Socrates in his quest to establish the rule of reason and justice was rejected and killed by his people. The Outsider

as an archetypal character in drama however, was firmly established in the late 19th century in the naturalistic, realistic and absurdist plays. Such plays as Gerhart Hauptman's *The Weaver* (1893). Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1883). Other highlights are Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1966). Ngugi Wa Thiong'O and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* (1970) among others.

In his introduction to the plays of Ibsen, Peter Watts cites *An Enemy of the People* as "a unique example of the crusading hero" (2). By the same token, he goes on to say that Jim Porter in Osborne's play, *Look Back in Anger* (1967) is also an Outsider (3). However in the context of this paper, Jim Porter the hero of Osborne's play does not qualify as a consummate Outsider. Ibsen's Dr. Stockman does. This is because while Stockman's crusade is community centered and motivated by genuine unselfish goals, Jim Porter's own is narrow and self centered. His social crusade does not go beyond self pity and personal loathing of the establishment this shares certain parallel with the main character of *The 41th Tale*. Consequently, his struggle does not extend beyond his living room. Bearing this fact in mind we can conveniently situate Jim Porter in the rank of the Sociological Outsider.

Niyi Osundare, in his study of Soyinka, argues that the Outsider as a theme runs the gamut of most of Soyinka's literary works. He contends that his works often portray the plight of the individual who runs against the juggernaut authority (52). The modern Nigerian Dramas portrays the Outsider as a player and victim of the decayed socio political and economic life of the country. They dramatize the attempts of the down trodden masses led by this Outsider, to change these bad social structures. These Dramas show the widening schism between 'the haves and have nots'. They could be thus referred to as dramas of social criticism.(22). Some examples are Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* and *Kongi's Harvest*. Femi Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song*, *Who is Afraid of Solarin*, *Morountodun*, Tunde Fatunde's *Oga Na Tief Man*, *No More Oil Boom* and many others. A good number of Nigerian Dramatists see the Outsider as a product of history which cannot be suppressed (48). For instance in Tunde Fatunde's *Blood and Sweat*, (1985)., Hassan the trade union leader wages a war against the establishment represented by the American Florida Oil company and their Nigerian cohorts, represented by Alhaji Bauchi, Oba Gbolaga, Professor Owokunle the Vice Chancellor and chief Brown Kennedy. Hassan ends up being imprisoned by the establishment. Another example could be taken from Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*. In this play, Wazobia who we can regard as the Outsider spearheads the fight for the self-realization of women (Dunton, 1992). We can still take one more example from Bode Sowande's *Farewell to Babylon* (1976) to illustrate our point. In this play, the researcher identifies Moniran as the Outsider. In the lines where he bemoans his predicaments we observe the humanness and the paradox of the archetype often seen in the works of modern Nigerian dramatists,

I put the whole of my life in the state. Like a fool I poured all the ideas of my youth into an optimism which was soaked up by the desert soul of my country (32).

A thorough examination of most works on criticism or playwriting relating to the crusader or the Outsider as we have termed him in this work are written from moralistic or collective perspectives. His efforts are always subsumed in that of the community. Apart from Soyinka who has given the individual crusader some identity in his plays, most other playwrights and critics have

approached the issue from the precinct of collective crusade and collective struggle. In summary, we see two clear conceptions of the Outsider from this review, one the sociological and the other, the literary. We highlighted the major differences associated with the two conceptions of the Outsider and in doing this, we show that the sociological Outsider is not always an unselfish social crusader but that the literary Outsider is always guided by egalitarianism and unselfish goals.

For the purposes of this paper we shall adopt the sociological definition of the outsider because the main character in *The 14th Tale* operates as a single disturbed soul seeking for identity and definition of purpose. He strikes us as a split personality who battles with inherited personal demons and the need to chart a social identity during his infancy in Nigeria and later in the diaspora. Thus we shall examine him as an outsider driven by personal fears and hopes and not by any desire to help society or chart some high moral grounds.

Synopsis of the Play

Innuu Ellams' *The 41th Tale* is a solo drama in five chapters. The plot revolves around the main character whom we identify as Inua charting the course of his development as a little boy in Nigeria to a Youngman in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The plot gives us insight into motives and persuasions which propels the character from the beginning. Some of them are hereditary, some social while a good number of them were self-inflicted. As the narrative progresses, Inua, evolves from the rebellious and restless soul to a recognition of the futility of crass exuberance and idealism. His encounters with several individuals, left indelible marks in his psyche and helped him progress towards that self-recognition at the foot of his father's sick bed.

Inua The Outsider

Inua, in this drama plays the role of the omniscient narrator. This affords him the opportunity to recount or reenact thoughts and feeling of characters as well as their words and actions. In the first chapter we are presented with a restless spirit who prides himself as a fitting chip of his forebears. He relishes in this fact chronicling the escapades and exploits of his father and grandfather. These revelations serve as beacons that reinforce the genesis of Inua's recalcitrance and adventurousness as a little boy.

They say he ran so fast, the ground gasped, forgot to take footprints; they lost him in the fields but the story never left memory, was told around campfires and followed by his son (my father) to school where a campus wide trend of long nicknames was maximized by a senior boy who thumbed through a textbook's index, added *Periplaneta Americana*, the most elaborate he could find, to Nevada his old title and swaggered through halls slapping young boys for mispronouncing his name (8)

Inua is at bay with the authorities at school and home. He lives in a world of his own carefully choosing those battles to wage or prank to indulge in. In England he metamorphoses from the rustic Nigerian boy to a young gentry of the British kind;

I learn new sear words...that Mel B is the finest spice girl and if you spray Lynx on a patch of fabric and breathe deeply, there's a ringing in your ears and you giggle like little girls. Eventually, the novelty wears, teachers see past my

practiced blank stare, my African accent thins; and a new boy joins the class, far more interesting...His name is Luis (16).

Inua's deviancy continues until they move from London to Dublin in his mid-teens. There he was the only Black boy in his new school. One of the first glimpses into the persona of the main character runs thus;

Inheritor of fast feet and father's contempt for authority, who try as I might to break the line, have battled aunts and uncles, been chased through schools and have climbed out more windows than burglars do. I wonder which story will reach my son and wonder more what he will do (8).

As an outsider, Inua's deviancy has its roots in the family. We evince this much when he avers, "My grandfather's fleet feet and my father's contempt for authority catapult me across the swirling new world" (16). He also appears to be an individual who has abandoned himself to the whims of emotions. These emotions sometimes manifest in a flux of sexual, homicidal, exuberant or cathartic tendencies. This aspect of deviancy is given vivid portraiture in his first encounter with the girl named Donna Lorde.

We first kissed out tongues like dancers, lips the dance floor heart beating the backing track to tongue tip tango, we kiss as though Shango flung small sweetened lightening bolts between us like firework-flavoured mangoes...In this fruit frenzy and lightening shift, she tells me she does not do relationships. That should have alarm bells ringing but I was caught between wild stallions and electric mangoes. All I hear is a comma in a cascading kiss... besides, no strings attached loving was a luxury I could not miss so (23)

As an outsider, Inua falters at the end when he is faced with the reality of his father's deteriorating health;

And I accept this. I let it wash over, let it come...And slowly, things begin to unravel; a vague order to rise. Uncles and aunts call, demand and questions... My instant contempt for authority falters as I note the motives, the fears in their words...(28)

He ends his remonstrations languidly "They say when death laughs at a man, all a man can do is laugh back" (28). In the above lines he captures our imagination as a character that has gone full circle in a turbulent quest to discover his purpose and stature in the environment he finds himself. At the beginning he attributes his shortcomings and idiosyncrasies to nature and the unbridled slush of exuberance. His father's indisposition it would appear offered glimpses into his own future where all would no longer be carefree and mistakes easily forgotten or overcome. Here was an Inua who is faced with the consequences of a continued life as an outsider, a rebellious soul. He recalls his father's words that nature or life has a way of filtering and casting a balance in everyone's life.

Conclusion

The summation of our incursions into the outsider in *The 14th Tale* patters down to the fact that this is a character buffeted by his environment and peer group. To Inua's we include heredity. We see

this much in his adulation of a family tradition that thrived on recalcitrance, escapades and free spirit. He sees himself in the image of the classical Greek hero at the mercy of the mendacious fate and as Shakespeare puts it "as bees to wanton boys". Inua made no bone in claiming his heritage of rebellion relishing the experience of every adventure or escapade. Of particular note however, is that each episode in his life from Plateau state Nigeria to England and elsewhere taught him some valuable lessons. These experiences grow in accretion with his evolution into a mature young man at the end of the play. As an outsider Inua deconstructs the notion that they often end up disillusioned or defeated by the society.

Literarily speaking, Inua's play could be said to be a commentary on the human condition within the globalized context. The various experiences of the main character in the various climes he found himself spoke eloquently of the anxieties, fear and finally adaptation to new environment and culture associated with changing environment and being an minority in largely heterogeneous metropole. This association yields bonds of trust and scepters of betrayal equally. It leads also to thresholds of joy and happiness and the brink of doom and despair. What perhaps we learn from Inua is the ability to discern and sift through the mass of conflicting events and emotions and come out stronger. We understand the power of history and the need for self-realization and awareness. In going the hug of transformation, Inua, transports us back to the very beginning of the plot where the only strong and discernably personae was molded in the image of his father. Thus at the end he ends up being a chip of the old block, and more of a product of nurture than nature.

References

- Becker, Howard. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1973.
- Bilton, Tony et al. *Introductory Sociology*. London: Macmillan Press, 1992.
- Calvert, Peter. *Revolution*. New York: Praeger Publishers Inc. 1970.
- Clement, H.A. *The Story of the Ancient World*. London; George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd. 1979.
- Cohen, J. *Slaves to Capitalism*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1989.
- Dunton, Chris. *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian Drama in English Since 1970*. London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1992.
- Ellams, Inua. *The 14th Tale*. United Kingdom: Flipped Eye Publishing, 2009.
- Frazer, Williams. *The Urban Surge*. New York: Peterson Press, 1974.
- MacCrow, Judith. *Social Deviance*. London: Willson Inc. 1980.
- Nwahunanya, Chinyere. *The Outsider in West African Fiction*. A Paper Presented at the 8th International Conference on African Literature and the English Language. May 1988. University of Calabar, Nigeria.
- Onwueme, Tess. *The Reign of Wazobia*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1988.
- Osofisan, Femi. *Morountodun and Other Plays*. Ikeja: Longman Nigeria Ltd., 1982.
- , *The Chattering and The Song*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Structure and Form in Modern Nigeria Novel*, in *Perspective on African Literature*. Eldred Jones ed. London: Heinemann Press, 1984.
- Rowland, Edward. *The Outsider in Our System*. New York: Dovner Publications Inc. 1990.
- Sowande, Bode. *Farewell To Babylon*. Ibadan: Longman Drumbeat, 1976.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Kongi's Harvest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

- Myth, Literature and the African World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Stevens, Robert. Issues on Social Deviance. New York: Wang and Gate, 1984.
- Taylor, Richard, Understanding The Elements of Literature. London: Macmillan, 1981.
- Wartson, Mark. The Society and The Crusader: A Study in Social Forms. London: Faber and Faber, 1978.
- Watts, Peter. Introduction to Henrik Ibsen's An Enemy of The People. New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986.