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EDITORIAL COMMENTS

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CULTURAL RECONSTRUCTION AND EXPERIMENTAL EXPLORATION FOR PEACE IN OLU OBAFEMI'S *DARK TIMES ARE OVER*

By

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Abstract

'Cultural construction' is a critical invention in the pastiche of cultural reconstruction in the "racial turn" of cultural studies. For cultural construct, in whatever form, is housed by change, a permanent doctrine of necessity. Consequently, this paper, through Alan Sinfield's theory of "art as cultural production" examines cultural reconstruction and experimental exploration for peace in Olu Obafemi's Dark Times are Over? We locate seven distinct theatrical aesthetics in the experimental performance of Dark Times are Over? The text is, however, interpreted as a dramatist's ideological transformation and potent search for peace among the Nigerian youths.

Introduction

The intervention of culture (whether for negative or positive reason) in the social process, cannot be divorced from the expanse and the endlessly controversial cultural studies within the tradition of postcolonial literary criticism. Consequently, "culture change is constant, ubiquitous, and

only moderately predictable" (Wallace, 4). As a cult of personality for community and institution, culture can be dialectical and at the same time eclectic.

The regenerative essence of culture deifies and housed its dynamism. The dynamic motif of culture within human consciousness invariably structures it for change. As a determinant factor in human evolution, an existing culture builds itself to systematically reconstruct the individuals in the society. This perhaps is one of the reasons why Wole Soyinka concludes that "culture is important for mankind to understand itself and necessary for the engine of social progress" (Okome, 16).

Thus, if a society is predictable, the mores, ethics, ethos and other cultural variables of that society are sacred. This may likely be the case in a monocultural setting. In a multicultural society, however, the tension and fear of domination of one culture against the other through culture variables are most often a zero-sum game for conflict.

The conflict within a culture will definitely affect the society by electrifying the crisis of identity. The dramatist, within the cultural materialism of the institution of the theatre thus has a duty to his imaginary and real society. He has to interpret the causes and effects of conflict of culture to his audience since he is also been fed by the materials in his society.

Interestingly, the intervention of culture and its production in the social process necessarily informs this study. We will be doing this by considering the essence of cultural reconstruction and experimental exploration for peace in Olu

Obafemi's year 2005 theatrical opus, the *Dark Times Are Over? (A Topical Drama)*.

The cliché of cultural construction, we argue in this work, is critically invented in the pastiche of cultural reconstruction within the "racial turn" of cultural studies. Our theoretical framework is the Alan Sinfield's theory of "art as cultural production" and our major finding is the location of seven distinct theatrical aesthetics in the experimental performance of *Dark Times Are Over?* We interpret the text, as a dramatist's ideological transformation and potent search for peace among the Nigerian youths and elsewhere.

The Theoretical Borderline of Cultural Studies, Art and Racial Turn

The theoretical borderline of cultural studies has been comparatively expanded by scholars such as Williams (1980), Sprinker (1987), Sinfield (1990, 1992 and 1999) and Arndt (2006) among several others to include a potpourri of issues within postmodern discourse.

In fact, the basic notion of cultural studies has been captured by Womack (593) as that which

> look outwardly at the social, artistic, political, economic and linquistic *mélange*... Cultural studies manifests itself in a wide array of interpretative dimensions, including such intersecting fields of inquiry as gender studies, postcolonialism, race and ethnic studies, pedagogy, ecocriticism, the politics of nationalism, popular culture, postmodernism and historical criticism, among a variety of topics.

Generally in arts, it will be extremely difficulty for us to talk about any crucial issue without a direct or indirect

reference to culture. The expanding issues within culture and its variables have also found themselves within the literary discourse of cultural studies.

It is, therefore, important to consider the three assumptions below as we attempt to understand cultural studies:

1. Is the production of art the production of culture?
2. Should we be talking of cultural construction in view of the regenerative nature of culture?

   Or
3. Should we tarry and talk about cultural reconstruction in view of change, a key mediator in the social process?

While attempting to provide answer to postmodernism in a seminal article titled "Answer to the Question, What is the Postmodern?", Jean-Francois Lyotard examines the essence of culture and concludes that "artistic and literary investigation is doubly threatened by 'cultural politics' on one side, by art and book market on the other" (Lyotard, 375). This has confirmed our first assumption that art is the production of culture, since culture has been confirmed to be the totality of people's ways of life.

Interestingly, it is also important to locate and situate Alan Sinfield's nostalgia on the theory of "art as cultural production". While concluding that art, in whatever form, should be seen as the production of culture, Sinfield (631-3) submits that

> art draws attention to the ideology in which it is constructed... Literature becomes one set of practices within the range of cultural production; a 'discourse' we might say, meaning the working assumptions of those involved in those practices, together with the institutions that sustain them. Notions of literature transcending society, history, and politics then appear, in themselves, as ideological maneuvers.

Sinfield's conclusion on the interface of art as cultural production draws extensive examples from Karl Marx's dialectics of cultural materialism. Afterall, "it is a technical point, almost: every inside is defined by the outside" (639). Art is the inside, its production is the outside and this, in clear term is the celebration of culture through cultural production.

If Alan Sinfield becomes culturally political and reflective within literary criticism, Gumucio-Dagron is probably angered with any culture that fails to be dynamic. He fumes that "a culture that is static is not a living culture; it becomes folklore, a palsied manifestation of old practices where only the form remains visible, only the façade appears expired of any creative content" (Gumucio-Dagron, 87). Dynamism makes any culture to be known while its failure to assimilate icons within the modern nay global market makes it a dead culture waiting to be buried.

The changing nature of culture and its critical intellection also finds theoretical solace in Shankar Raman's "the racial turn" which he sees as

> a double movement away from the "race" and towards "race", a reformation of history with the aim of transforming the conditions of suppression in condition of liberation. The tensions which result from this double movement are insurmountable on the level of literary theory,

> because theory are symptoms of crisis within the environment. Literature and their critics contribute to the overcoming of this crisis, in as much as they make a transformation possible of the everyday practices and their meanings. In this sense the racial turn is a fight for the meaning of "race" (Arndt, 15).

A pastiche of sentences such as "turn within the race", "turning the gaze away from the race", "turn of perspective", "race constructs", "race theories" (15-8) and so on have been metaphorically used to capture the essence of "racial turn" which in itself encapsulates cultural turn within the politics of culture and the dialectics of cultural studies.

Comparatively, art thus becomes an epilogue after the tension created by culture. While culture, the starting point of man's evolution, becomes the prologue. Our fervent concern in the theoretical borderline between cultural studies, art as cultural production and the turn of the race *a la* "racial turn" is the interconnection within the icons. This interpretative expedition is thus a summation of the crisis of identity, *conflict within the self* and the image of instability intrinsically linked to the all embracing global culture in the endlessly unpredictable social process.

Certainly, man's deliberate acculturation is a critical negation of his natural culture. Although this has worked in Africa especially in the French speaking countries, the resistance to it is the artists' search for the proper location of culture as once reasoned by Homi Bhabha. This position critically informs our second and third assumptions: cultural construction or cultural reconstruction? Can we figuratively

or otherwise construct or reconstruct an existing culture? We hold the view that cultural reconstruction is the essence of reliving. This is the situation where culture brings back the golden 'pasts' and insulates the irrelevant aspects of the 'pasts' to accommodate the current variables within the global cultural market.

In the art world, culture is generously transitory. The writers, who wa Thiong'o (ix) says "are the surgeons of the heart and souls of a community" will produce his work(s) from culture (material or immaterial). His silent production (play-text) is an incomplete work of art unless it is produced through the theatre. What the artists often produce even within the dialectic of new historicism is but a reconstruction of an existing culture. To answer the question of what is cultural construction will be for us to see it as a gamut of unformed, and underdeveloped pristine culture that has no place under change, the essence of culture. We must state here also that cultural reconstruction falls within the dialectics of deconstruction although deconstruction have wider literary and linguistic possibilities if properly scrutinised.

The context of culture, we submit, cannot be monopolised. Its dynamism is to reconstruct itself as "literary criticism must engage itself in the attempts to illuminate the specific order" (Udumukwu, 327). The landscape of culture redeems itself by changing and shifting within the paradigms. Certainly, all literary works on culture potentially make such literary workers to engage in the critical issue of recontexualisation and reconstruction of the main themes and tendencies within culture.

The Textual Pedagogy of *Dark Times Are Over?*

The cultural contexts of Olu Obafemi's *Dark Times Are Over?* are numerous. The play celebrates the negative and positive forces within the Nigerian socio-cultural, religio-political and judicial institutions. This play can thus be interpreted as the writer's response to the degeneration of the Nigerian society to the state of lawlessness. The playwright also provides solution to the problems that he celebrated in his play within what Bodunde (76) sees as "an emergent tradition" which is "comparable with the revolutionary resurgence of literary activities".

The ideological war in the play is the need to fight the incidence of rape, cultism, corruption and social injustice that have eaten deep into our "educational and macro-national system". Consequently, Olu Obafemi while re-writing himself says that:

> The statement of the play is apt in the present state of social incoherence in our educational institutions, over-taken by devious anti-social conducts ranging from cultism, sexual permissiveness, and examination malpractices and so on – all of these resulting largely from social decadence, a prostrate economy, squalor and ethical rot in the larger society (vi-viii).

We have also argued that the socio-cultural and the moral degenerations in the Nigerian nation through (cultism, prostitution and other social vices) have turned quite a number of the Nigerian youths into liabilities rather than assets to the Nigerian nation. Yepa One and Yepa Two are two disgruntled citizens of a fictitious nation called Odajuland in

the play. The duo leads a deadly cult group in raping innocent students and recklessly displaying brute force. Beatrice, another party freak and a noted "half-nude dresser' on campus cannot escape the Yepas, as she is mercilessly raped, thus setting the tone of the conflict of this play (x).

Other side attractions that build on the tension and conflict of the play can be seen in the activities of the corrupt Judge, Porter, Alhaji Maikudi, Aristo Girls, Prosecutor and their resistance, through collective spirit by the Muslim Brothers, Christian Sisters, Man O' War and Jaycees in the play. Let us consider the crossfire between Man 'O' War and the two Yepas after raping Beatrice:

MAN O' WAR: No you destroyed her essence, her dream and her pride. That's what you did. That's what you've always done with her type.

YEPA 2: Shut up! What has come over you? What trifle is that? How can an *awo* talk like this?

YEPA 1: We mated with her spirit to give her courage and power over her mates and rivals. She will never experience fear again in her life.

MAN O' WAR: (Smiling) Hm. You both amuse me. A girl came to the university to learn. You cornered her and took her pride away from her. You destroyed the moral base of her existence (25).

We should not forget that cultists and cult-related activities virtually hijacked the Nigerian educational system not until

the immediate present when their activities are reducing. Their fear is the beginning of wisdom for administrators and managers in the Nigerian higher institutions.

Some Reflections on the Rehearsal Process

As a member of Ajon Players, the collaboration between the Departments of the Performing Arts and English was a welcoming development in the promotion of the theatre and inter-disciplinary dialogue. Interestingly, the artistic lot of the production fell on the Crew Members. Importantly, at "Audition, a total of two hundred and eighty actors, drawn from the two Departments, turned up enthusiastically to pick up a part" (vi). The snag was that fifty-five thespians made the list and our insistence that the rest should go fell on deaf ears because the Audition was lively while students don't want to miss out from the collaboration going on.

Attendance at rehearsals was good. We were firm, and gave artistic directions to the performers throughout. This is because most of the performers were greenhorns. Everyday, the script was being re-written, new scene added.

Though the workshop style was adopted, total control and intervention remained with the Crew. Coded and crafted in a robust, bold, vitriolic and satiric language, and dramaturgy, this total theatre experimental production also wore the Brechtian mask to complete the dramaturgical cycle of influence of Bertolt Brecht in the African theatre.

The researcher (the Standing Assistant Director) was part of the artistic whole in the production of Olu Obafemi's *Dark Times Are Over?* Tried as we did, we must give credits to

the Playwright/Director of the play, Olu Obafemi for believing in us all the time, S.E. Ododo (the Technical Director/Production Manager) for facilitating the production and for making us to take the production to its zenith and A.S. Abubakar for his generous support and for transforming from the Assistant Production Manager in the beginning of the production to a willing Assistant Director.

The Performance of *Dark Times Are Over?*

Dark Times Are Over? was performed on the 16th and 17th of May, 2005 for the then University of Ilorin's Pro-Chancellor and Chairman of the Governing Council, Emeritus Professor Ayo Banjo and the management of the University led by the former Vice-Chancellor, Professor S.O.O. Amali (Obafemi, vi). The guests served as the first class audience.

The bulk of our audience was the students of the University of Ilorin who occupied the entire Africa Hall, Mini-Campus Venue of the performance. A hundred of them stayed outside the Hall, managing to watch the performance. The reception of the performance was excellent and positive comments were made about the performance by some of the distinguished guests. Clearly, the performance of *Dark Times Are Over?* was a statement well-made.

Experimental Exploration and Theatrical Aesthetics in *Dark Times Are Over?*

Seven distinct theatrical aesthetics can be located in the experimental exploration of Olu Obafemi's *Dark Times Are Over?* They are:

1. **The Theatrical Aesthetics of Dramatic Summation**

Hidden under a play's tableau, the theatrical aesthetics of dramatic summation captures the major themes, "episodes and enactments that will constitute the main thrust of the performance" (1). The dramatic actions in the *Dark Times Are Over?* that constitute the core of the theatrical aesthetics of dramatic summation are the cameo part involving the Lover and the Kegites, the Cultists, the Sugar-Daddy (Chief) and the University girl (Baby), the Porter and the Baby, the Girls and Alhaji Maikudi, the Narrator and the Audience and so on. The beauty of this theatrical aesthetics is that the plot of the play will be reduced and neatly summarised and theatricalised within some few minutes. Though heavily decompartmentalised, songs and music and other theatrical icons within the total theatre idioms such as dance, pantomimic dramatisation and so on are used to spice up the dramatic actions. The theatrical aesthetics of dramatic summation is a fast moving overlapping dramatic gamut. It is beyond the normal opening glee and it must not wait for any interlude. This was realised in our experiment with *Dark Times Are Over?*

2. **The Theatrical Aesthetics of Inter-textual Tension**

In literary theory, it has been confirmed that "inter-textual tension occurs when events or characters in one literary text serve as a mirror or as an adversarial critique of events and characters in another literary text" (Alamu, 3). The aesthetics of inter-textual tension is a vicious circle because

known and related characters who must have appeared in previous productions are brought back to the stage of life to re-enact a serious or re-occurring national issue. In this particular production, the Yepas who are cultists are the same stereotype cult-related characters in Akanji Nasiru's *Come Let us Reason Together,* Zulu Sofola's *Ivory Towers,* Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi,* Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants,* A.A. Adeoye's *The Killers* (first directed in 1998 at the University of Uyo by the researcher), Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* and so on. It was easy for us to characterise the two Yepas because of the inter-texual relationship that the two characters have with other characters in the plays mentioned above. Here, the director will only recall from past experiences and he can as well consider Constantin Stanislavski's emotional recall in "The System" and marry it with David Garrick's acting theory of transubstantiation to create characters whose main concern are to heighten the tragic tension in a lawless society.

3. **The Theatrical Aesthetics of Brechtian-Afrocentricism.**

Certainly, this style is the re-Brechtianlisation of stage iconography within African inherent artistic resources. In *Dark Times Are Over?* this style was used to create overlapping dramatic actions through a production that has no tolerance for intermissions.

Stools, chairs and the necessary stage decors were artistically built into the performance. The narrative technique, inherently African was also dialectically used to create fraternisation between the stage audience, the

performers and the live audience. Minimally, costumes were changed on stage and members of the audience were at some point deconstructed to act as performers. This theatrical aesthetics is convenient to us because we have valourized it into twelve aesthetics in our Neo-alienation Style. We have also used this style to direct four major plays from the romantic to the postmodern traditions. To use the Brechtian style and or do Brechtian plays successfully, Perloff (45) warns that the structure of his style and plays require both serious resources and sophisticated artistry.

4. The Theatrical Aesthetics of Dramatic Subversion

We merely articulated the playwright ideological leaning under the theatrical aesthetics of dramatic subversion. This aesthetics succeeded in changing the line of expectation to celebrate the reality of the moment. The Judge in the performance who was about giving judgement in his constitutional COURT OF LAW was substituted for the people's Judge, Agbe who emerged through a popular vote. He also delivered his judgement in the PEOPLE'S COURT. This is a clear negation of the process in which judges are appointed in Nigeria. Perhaps, some relevant statements from him may necessarily give direction to the crux within the aesthetics of dramatic subversion:

AGBE: Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for electing me unanimously. It may surprise you that I rejected the robe. It is a rejection of a legal system that is marred with technicalities and hypocrisy. Our court of law in Odajuland is an appendage to the larger rotten system out there. It is a place where justice has been sold for a mesh of porridge by a rotten, corrupt and nepotic leadership. Now, to the main business of the day. (He clears his throat) No doubt, Yepa 1 is guilty (Obafemi, 40).

This statement from Agbe, we hope, will see the light of the day when we will have a good legal system in Nigeria.

5. Actuality – Reality – Topicality Theatrical Aesthetics

This aesthetics necessarily brings the contemporary issues of the day that are topical to the stage for performance articulation. However, issues such as the gods, rituals and so on have no place for the theatre must treat topical issues within our socio-political reality. In the production of *Dark Times Are Over?* topical issues of cultism, prostitution and moral degeneration were treated. All the songs were sourced from socio-cultural and religious institutions such as the Man O' War, Christian and Islamic groups and a popular refrain from the cult groups, were used. This anti-folkloric approach in songs and music was mainly used to power the creative impetus of the actuality-reality-topicality theatrical aesthetics. Same method was adopted for the choice of costumes and props. Dense myths inherent in our history and tradition were ignored for serious topical issues. Thus, the production was simply a theatre of commitment in the art for heart's sake's context.

6. **Theatrical Aesthetics of Socialist Reformation**

Here, the playwright, Olu Obafemi transformed himself from the hardcore radical Marxist writer through his previous productions to become a benevolent socialist writer where the theatre, one of the cultural institutions under Karl Marx's Cultural Marxism was effectively used to reconstruct the Nigerian dying culture. To achieve this, the members of the Audience (characters) in the play were made to accept the fact that the ordinary people which they represented in the performance must be reformed beyond being mere followers because their actions and inactions can make or mar their society. Typically Brechtian, they decided and gave direction to the major issues in the performance. All the characters were reformed in the production. The theme song in the play built on the theatrical aesthetics of socialist reformation in the performance:

Dark times are over
A new day has come
It's a new beginning
The darkness is gone (48).

This song quintessentially represents the popular slogan, *mutatis mutandis* for Africa (Babalola, 10). *Mutatis mutandis* is a clear invitation to the renaissance and cultural rebirth of Africa. This is a rebirth from violence to peace, which is one of the cardinal points under cultural reconstruction and sustainable development.

7. **The Theatrical Aesthetics of Campus Vernacular**

To the scholars in the humanistic studies, campus

vernacular is a decimation of English language. However, the reality is that campus vernacular has come to stay and it has relatively enjoyed popularity among the Nigerian students. In *Dark Times Are Over?* the performers were deliberately made to speak normally without the imposition of English language grammatical rules. Consequently, words such as: "chest me one time", "omo na mi bi dis", "I want to jabo", "I want to pepe", "Na mi be dat", "you think say na free service?", "where you dey come from self?", "Hen eh, na now you dey begin talk", "why you con dey act as if you no know the formula before", "me I get plenty things to yarn oh, una wan hear?", "yarn us", "as if that one no do me. I come take an to heaven, from heaven to the earth. From earth down to hell again" and so on were part of the campus vernacular coined from Pidgin-English, Yoruba and the real English language. Body chemistry, semotic interpretations and interjections were also infused into these words so as to give linguistic colouration to them. This theatrical aesthetics makes the majority of our audience who were students to accept the play and its message – claiming that the performance indeed represented them thoroughly.

The Metaphor of Global Peace in *Dark Times Are Over?*

John (1971), Shue (1979), Barry (1982), Pogge (1989 and 1999), Sterner (1999), Ingram (2000 and 2002), Musa (2006) and many other scholars have written extensively on the essence of peace as a critical factor in conflict resolution, national development and unity. The image and identity factors, social

justice, human rights, equal distribution of a country's national resources and above all, the family, social group and culture are seen as material and immaterial instruments that can be used to promote local, national and international peace.

A discourse on peace is also ideological. Whether one is a Marxist, Humanist, Socialist, Communist or Postmodernist will go a long way to determine one's quest for, and appreciation of peace. In fact, David Ingram supports the Marxists and Postmodernists condemnation of the Humanists in peace discourse to confirm the place of ideology in peace matter:

> After all, Marxists and Postmodernists have rightly noted that abstractions like "humanity" and "man" have all-too-often served to justify the exclusion of most of the world population from enjoying basic rights simply because they were deemed to be less than human by standard of class, gender, culture, and race... I believed, however, that the question can be answered; universal humanity is becoming a reality for those who chose to identify themselves primarily as human beings... (Ingram, 409).

Exclusionist's programmes, cultural dislocation, social stratification, problems of identity, gangsterism, oppression and so on are some of the major inhindrances to a peaceful society.

The play, *Dark Times Are Over?*, has brought to the fore, the danger of secret society (cultism), judicial corruption and inequality affecting a fictitious Odajuland. These evils exposed by the play nonetheless are the cog in the wheel of

peaceful co-existence. The metaphor of this play extends beyond imaginary society. The society of *Dark Times Are Over?* is the entire world. The script is thus a manifesto for global peace because all the societal's problems treated in the play extend to our real and imaginary societies.

To dwell more on this is to accept the fact that there is no country and or continent under the sun without youthful rascality extended to include gangsterism, prostitution and cultism most especially among the teeming youths in the global world. Most of the activities of the youths who belong to the other side are most perpetuated in schools and higher institutions.

A condemnation of this act should thus been seen as the playwright's fruitful search for peace which is an asset in diffusing tension. A university without cultists and cult related activities will be peaceful. The university administrators will have time to face the challenges of scholarship and development. So also, a society whose judiciary is free, fair and fearless will promote social equity and justice.

Corruption, one of the oldest crimes in the entire world often leads to tension and conflict especially if a nation's wealth and resources are concentrated in the hands of a few cabals. Tension and conflict may certainly develop into chaos and lawlessness – two anti-peace's social problems. To condemn corruption (judicial, political, social and religious) as the play has done is to preach, through dramatic and social engineering the indisputable power of peace as necessary for any people, society or nation that yearn for growth. Certainly,

this preaching should be a continuous one because society, in the world of Camus (192) is but a jungle in spite of man's ceaseless desires to change it. The dramatist has a duty to moderate what goes on in the jungle.

The Conclusion

Olu Obafemi's *Dark Times Are Over?* has remarkably shown the ideological transformation of the dramatist from a long- windy-word-executive in the Marxian mode to a moderate user of the English language within our contemporary reality. This deliberate transformation is the writer's cultural reconstruction and search for peace among the Nigerian youths. Peace has no substitute and lack of it is violence. The search for global peace is Olu Obafemi's agenda for growth and sustainable development.

As the youths in the race (the Nigerian society) turn from decency to indecency and fall dangerously from morality to immorality, we are certain that the near dead of African culture will be revived and to the joy and admiration of all. The institution of the theatre which is an extension of culture can still be used functionally to propagate and preach what is culturally correct so that the much elusive peace can be attained.

New production, if handled dexterously by qualified and competent crew members must produce some aesthetics that can be used by other dramatists in our search for the authentic African theatre. It is in this light that the seven distinct theatrical aesthetics located in the experimental performance of *Dark Times Are Over?* are recommended for use

by theatre directors who may wish to embark on the same related experience.

The text of *Dark Times Are Over?* is also recommended for adoption by WAEC, NECO and other relevant examination regulation organisations. We are of the opinion that this will help spread the gospel of peace enshrined in the play especially among the Nigerian youths.

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