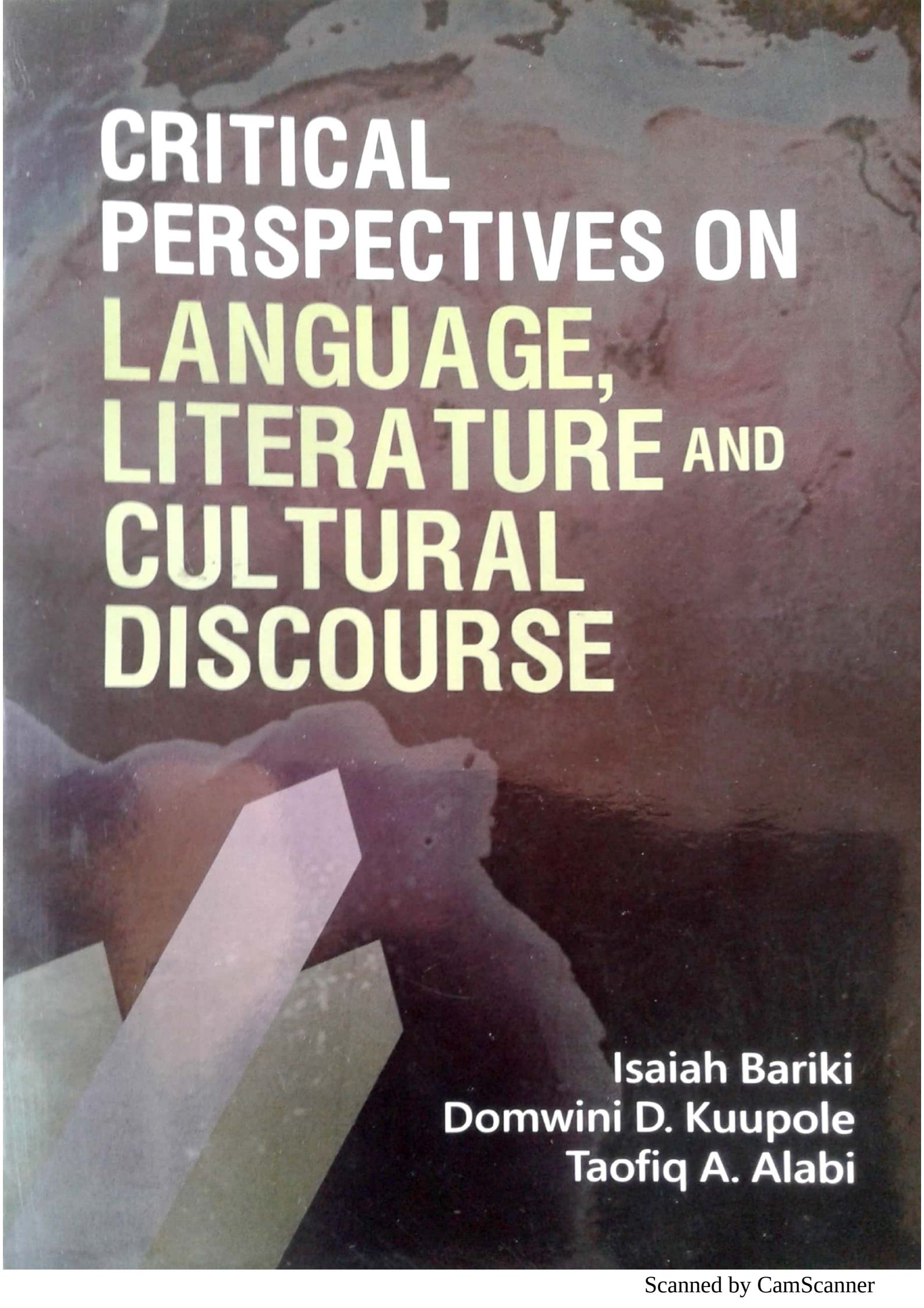




CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURAL DISCOURSE

**Isaiah Bariki
Domwini D. Kuupole
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ISBN: 978-978-991-135-6

Published by
**Department of French,
University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria
&
Department of French,
University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana**

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10

AN EXAMINATION OF MORAL DECADENCE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY IN SOME SELECTED PLAYS OF TONI DURUAKU

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Introduction

African society in contemporary times is gradually becoming heterodox in nature thereby presenting her as non-conformists to the aboriginal belief of a typical African society. The idea of copying the Western world (Europe, America and Asia) in the name of religion, modernisation and globalisation is strangulating the cherished cultural values and moral tenets that were the hallmark of the prehistoric African society. It is a known fact that African society scowls unruly behaviours like: disrespect for elders, prostitution, premarital affairs, marital infidelity, corruption, money rituals, fraud, armed robbery, drug peddling and addiction, indecent dressing, laziness, murder, abortion etc.. Invariably, the down surge in these values and morals in contemporary Africa calls for concern, as continual neglect is an invitation to orchestrated moral decadence and promotion of high level of crimes, which may confine man to a certain behavioural pattern and as a result which the society may be disorientated from its unique and distinctively established ways of life.

In the past, there were rewarding synergies between the Christian, Islamic and traditional institutions, to the extent that adherents of the three faiths abhor betrayal, alcoholism, philandering, premarital sex, ill-will, homosexuality, bestiality, corruption, rape, anger, etc., which to some extent represent universal moral values. Of course, there were peculiar cultural practices that are specific to a given society. Notwithstanding the cultural differences, each society held tenaciously to its moral and cultural values. Obuasi (2007, p. 253) asserts that: "There are over 3,500 ethnic groups in the world and yet no two of them have identical cultural configuration". Africa is unique and distinct from every other society in terms of culture, hence Taylor's (1871) cited in Hamzat, (2007, p.158) becomes apt that: "every society has

some knowledge that is peculiar to it i.e. what the society has faith in, like philosophy, myth, religion, taboos and rules used in guiding the people's moral".

Drawing from the above, Johnson (2004, p.36) posits that: "Africans do not joke with their moral values". When a society starts to joke on or downplay its guiding rules that regulate what is good or bad, the most vital aspect of the culture, which ensures a sane society, then, values and moral decadence sets in. Accordingly, this paper examines the issues of cultural values and moral decadence in contemporary African society and how this has thrown Africa into a myriad of economic, social and political problems in recent times. This is with a view to serving as a tool for re-discovering African's identity and to fix the cultural values and moral dislocation that have altered her unique cultural heritage on the altar of modernity. The paper employs content analysis method of research by doing a critical study and analyses of three plays by Toni Duruaku: *Cash price* (2007) and *Silhouettes* (2000) and *A Matter of identity*(2003).

A Literature Review

Contemporary African society battles with social, political and economic problems emanating from moral and cultural values degeneration. Within this purview, corruption among African leader's especially traditional rulers has shown clear evidence of moral degeneration in Africa. Onwueme (2011, p.100) observes that: "Unfortunately, even the traditional rulers who are supposed to be there to protect ...are in collision with the government and traditional forces. So it's a very, very savvy kind of conspiracy against the poor". However, Alumona (2008, p.122) sees it differently when he submits that: "The traditional African society abhors corruption or embezzlement or stealing of public property, and had strong sanctions against it". Alumona's submission buttresses the fact that the African society is well structured to accommodate every legitimate action that ensures collective growth of the society in general from the family level to larger society. This shows that the African society is perceived to be distinct from other societies in her practices that regulate moral decadence. Ejim and Okonkwo (2007, p.27) observe that:

African religion is the product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs, they observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myths, which carried religious meanings and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individual and his community.

On his part, Idamoyibo (2007, p.63) upholds that; "Act of fornication or adultery is considered a defilement of moral sanctity and very offensive." It is however, displeasing that these religious rules, which promote moral sanctity, as observed by Ejim and Okonkwo are no longer valued, and immorality such as,

premarital sex, infidelity in marriages, philandering, homosexuality, rape, bestiality are on the increase in contemporary Africa. Osofisan (2009, p.48) laments that:

Under the barrage of innumerable newspapers and magazines, these talk shows and reality programmes on television, and such things, our world has been made suddenly naked and exceedingly, exasperatingly amoral and loquacious. The values of decorum such as we used to know and respect them have sadly turned contingent...western culture and its values...for sex, voyeurism and violence.

Of all these moral laxities, sexual immorality tops the decay being experienced in Africa. Pride is no longer placed on virginity before marriage as it used to be. In the African arts, sanctity of morality is dashed as the society has turned prurient with copious display of nudity to attract larger viewership in most of our home video movies. Afolabi (1999, p.17) notes that: "Music albums, video films, stage drama and musical performances that integrate sex into their story lines, themes...sell five times more than others that engage in serious issues". Samuel (2012, p.30) corroborates this when he observes that: "Many African video films are filled with unbridled sex." One may be wondering why this is so and why it seems that the phenomenon has consumed both the audience and the film makers. Hetch (1994) cited in Samuel (2012, p.30) provides the answer: "It is a manifestation of cultural decay in African society." This paradigm shift negates the original essence of art in Africa, especially the folktale sessions, which hitherto are platforms for teaching morals. Ikibe (2012, p.30) recalls that: "Morals and ethics are taught at folktales sessions. Young men and maidens are taught decent ways of behaviours...essence of speaking the truth, chastity, especially among young girls".

Positions advanced so far tally with the African moral values. However, Adichie's (2014, n.p) has a dissent voice on homosexuality:

The new law that criminalizes homosexuality is popular among Nigerians. But it shows a failure of our democracy...we cannot be a just society unless we are able to accommodate being different, accept being different, live and let like...a crime has victims. A crime harms society. On what basis is homosexuality a crime?

Adichie's position expressed above seems to call for the legalisation of homosexuality on grounds that they are born with such instinct of sex orientation and that it is totally against the tenets of democracy to be denied of their right. If the society takes to Adichie's live and lets live concept, then other crime such as kleptomaniac can as well be legalised. It is noteworthy that Appadori (1982) cited in Ademeso (2008, p.144) vehemently opposes Adichie's when he posits that:

When we observe the life of man around us, we cannot fail to be struck by two facts; as a rule, everyman desires to have his own way, to think and act as he like; and at the same time, everyone cannot have his own

way, because he lives in a society. One man's desires conflict with those of another.

Other areas where moral degeneration has crept into African's ethical values are in the area of language and communications. Virtually all African societies have adopted foreign languages (English and French) as a lingua franca which further subjugates African culture. Extraneous languages and names are being super-imposed on Africa, which suffocate the existence of indigenous languages and names. Christianity and Islamic religions prefer to baptize their followers with foreign names. This apparent preference makes African languages and names look inferior to those of the Western world. Lukman (2014, p.10) goes beyond names to include the "craze" for non-African foods and dressing. He also observes that: "Many Africans no longer Africanize their dressing, food, language, and so on. Some could not even speak their local dialects not to talk of writing with it". All of these and many more forms of decadences that are not discussed here due to space constraint cause us to worry on the future of Africa in entrenching sound moral values in African.

Theoretical Framework

We employed J.W. Powell's *Acculturation theory* (1880) as the theoretical framework of this paper. John Wesley Powell is credited to have coined the word acculturation, first using it in 1880 as reported by United States Bureau of American Ethnography. In 1883, Powell defined acculturation as "psychological changes induced by cross-cultural imitation". (Archive.org, 2018)

The acculturation theory explains the process of cultural and psychological change that results when two cultures come in contact. However, the effect of acculturation can be seen at multiple levels, between the interacting cultures and at the group level. Acculturation often results in changes to culture, customs and social institutions. On another level, effects of acculturation result in changes in food, clothing and language. At the final level, which is the individual level, acculturation brings about changes not just in individual behaviour but in psychological and physical well-being. Acculturation specifically is the adoption, adaptation or learning of another culture.

The theory indicates that continuous contact between cultures have brought about changes and blending of foods, music, dances, clothing, tools and technology. It further explains that cultural exchange can either occur naturally through extended contact, or more quickly through cultural appropriation or cultural imperialism.

Acculturation theory explains that in cultural appropriation there is an adoption of some specific elements of a particular culture by members of a different cultural group. These include the introduction or importation of the following: dress, music, custom, which distort the existing culture. The theory also highlights that in cultural imperialism there is the practice of promoting the culture or language of one nation in another. This can take the form of active formal policy or general attitude

regarding cultural superiority. In the case of cultural appropriation as earlier mentioned, the native people mix up or abandon their existing culture to adopt other cultures. Meanwhile, in cultural imperialism, a particular culture is imposed on another native culture by a "superior" people living in a different culture. Although, this theory does not point out categorically the level of moral decadence that a culture under cultural imperialism or cultural appropriation experiences, it acknowledges the fact that there is always a change in this regard. Therefore, we use this theory to interrogate the cultural and moral uprightness or cultural decadence, the nature, causes and factors that precipitate the cultural values and moral decadence in contemporary Nigeria as an African society in the selected works of Toni Duruaku.

Synopsis of the Plays *Cash Price*, *Silhouettes* and *A matter of Identity*

The play, *Cash Price*, centres on Chinwe, a virtuous married lady, who is ensnared into act of infidelity by her promiscuous friend, Marie. Marie lures Chinwe to play along by selling to her an expensive cloth. She thereafter compels her to pay for the cloth before the earlier agreed date. Chinwe, in trying to prevent the news from getting to her husband, Uche, decides to borrow money from Obinna, a not too intimate friend, a paramour to Marie who had earlier proposed to her at the polytechnic. Unknown to Chinwe, Marie and Obinna have concocted a plan to trap Chinwe. She unfortunately falls prey by agreeing to sleep with Obinna out of frustration and making her to be guilty of cheating on their husbands thereby demean her moral life. This act of infidelity leads to the break-up in her marriage and she subsequently has to flee from her matrimonial home in shame.

The play, *Silhouettes* addresses the issue of succession in Amadike kingdom. The procedure for succession and enthronement of new kings is well spelt out in the sacred pact (law), but the power brokers in the community insist on including a contestant from a lineage that customarily is not qualified to contest for the kingship. Nwaeze, who comes from another clan, insists that he must be allowed to contest the stool in spite of the fact that it is not their turn. His ambition causes division among the elders of the land. Obialor, the custodian of the tradition as well as the king maker refused to consider Nwaeze as one of the contestants. Nwaeze, seeing that the old custom will not favour his ambition used money to buy over some elders. The truth prevails when it is discovered that Nwaeze had committed incest by sleeping with Ugonna, Maduka's daughter who is Nwaeze's niece. For this reason, Nwaeze is banished from Amadike, thereby making the old laws and custom to take their course.

The play, *A matter of Identity* treats issues of cultural misdirection and neglect in Umukwenu land. People of Umukwenu are forbidden by the ancestors from celebrating the annual festival, which will spell doom for the community if not celebrated. Consequently, the reasons for stopping them from celebrating the festival are revealed by the emissaries sent to find out why the ancestors prohibit the annual festival from the never-never land (land of the ancestors). In the eye of the ancestors,

the community has veered from the core essence of the festival as the community promotes betrayal, corruption, indecent dressing, immorality and use of foreign languages to communication in Umukwenu. The tall order from the ancestors is that until the community is ready to retract her steps, the festival will not hold and this will cause hardship to the community. The emissaries returned to Umukwenu to narrate the charges against the community, which the community agreed to correct. Thereafter, the festival is allowed to take place.

Critical Analysis of Cultural Values and Moral Decadence in Contemporary Africa in the selected works of Toni Duruaku

In the three plays; *Cash price*, *Silhouettes* and *A Matter of Identity* that we have understudied in this paper, there are palpable degeneration of values and morals in Africa and the live of individual, family and the larger society. In these plays, characters are well delineated and theatrically weaved to represents true African values and morals.

The plays reveal among others what lures the youth into immoral acts such as pimp, prostitution, armed robbery, gigolo etc. The aforementioned menace is projected in *Cash price* as contained in the dialogue below:

- Obinna:** Man, talk softly, I'm expecting Mr. Briggs and I've got someone in the bedroom.
- Jeff:** We'll hear his car when he arrives....This is dirty business [pause] and all for money.
- Obinna:** [goes for more drink] plus the good life. Free house, free car, enough money to buy what I like. I could make more than that if I work harder and increase the frequency of new girls (p.25).

Obinna, a polytechnic graduate who has no job finds pleasure in engaging in an illicit job as a pimp. He partners with one Mr. Briggs, a Westerner who specializes in filming sexual acts, without the fore knowledge of the young girls involved, for pornographic max production abroad for economic gains. This reflects Powell's *Acculturation theory* that in cultural appropriation there is an adoption of some specific elements of a particular culture by members of a different cultural group such as the introduction or importation of dress, music, custom, which distorts the existing culture.

However, Obinna soberly reflects thus:

- Obinna:** [Reflecting] supposing these girls were my sisters? I won't take kindly to anyone passing them around like a plate of kola nuts and making video films of them for sales abroad.(p.27)

The play, *Cash Price*, also reveals acts of immorality (prostitution) that students engage in. This is contained in the conversations below:

Ngozi: When is Sammy coming now? I want to go to Saloon...and I have evening lecture. You want me to miss it?

Obinna: You want to miss styling your hair or do you have sufficient money?

Ngozi: [smiling demurely] Well...okay. I'll wait. [Retires]

Obinna: The power of Naira!

Jeff: Who is Sammy?

Obinna: Mr. Briggs, of course...she's a regular one. A student at the University drinks like a fish. I don't know how she passes her exams (p.33)

Another act of immorality (sexual pervasion), where a blood relation engages in incest (sex between close relations) is illustrated in *Silhouettes*:

Udoka: I should be going. Have to catch an appointment you know Stella. She's usually upset when I'm late for a date.

Chidi: Stella's okay. It's your affair with Ugonna that worries me, your own cousin. (p.54)

Chidi's statement illuminates on the immoral act that have been going on between Udoka and Ugoma (cousins). The act, no doubt, is an erosion of cultural values and moral misdirection in contemporary Africa. It is obvious in virtually all spheres of life. This is akin to one of the features in *Acculturation theory* that pins some of the loss in moral values to cross cultural imitation.

In *A Matter of Identity*, the ancestors register their displeasure over the decay in individual, family and societal lives as they warn the people of Umukwenu to desist from acts that are inimical to the aboriginal conception and practices in their locality and Africa by extension, This is what Powell in his *Acculturation theory* describes as loss in moral values to cross cultural imitation. The dialogue below further expounds the notion of acculturation:

Orie: Reckless adoption of other cultures is ruining your individuality and identity

Afor: Your identity and individuality are being eroded...soon, you will be a people with no culture. A non-race look at that.[points dramatically downstage](p.54).

The cultural bastardisation is not spared though as the stage direction mimetically illuminates the discourse that follows suit:

(Light fades upstage. Downstage, now fully lit, show a group of people discussing in mime and laughing. The idea is to project a dress code, make up and behaviour alien to the people. They pass on, the light returns to upstage).

- Nkechi:** Who were those?
Okoli: What are they?
Afor: Your clan. Those who will come after you.
Nkechi: No, we do not dress like that. We do not walk like that.
Eke: It is in the future. Those are members of your clan completely out of joint with their roots lost.
Orie: They'll even lose their language in preference to those of other clans. In a group, they may not be able to tell their brother from others because of...
All: Wholesale adoption
Nkwo: ...you'll abandon your way of life that marks you out as a distinct people.
Eke: Much of your way of life is somehow linked to religion and you will be told they are wrong.
Orie: Wrong? They'll call them 'stupid', 'fetish'. All sorts of names. Dirty names.
Afor: But living a good moral life is what counts... (pp.55-56)

The above dialogues present a good moral lesson for those who sacrifice, subjugate and render inferior their core cultural values and embrace foreign cultures. It is appalling to find Africans who should be proud of their ebony black skin colour and opt for a fair complexion by bleaching.

We discovered that, western culture of Europe and America are vampire cultures as they are bent on enslaving, enculturation and relegation of other cultures. The pervasive presence of these cultures, through secularisation, globalisation and modernisation has almost successfully swallowed ours, making them (ours) appear archaic, primitive and undesirable.

Conclusion

So far in this paper, we have examined issues that border on cultural values and moral decadence in our contemporary society in the three selected plays of Toni Duruaku. The plays have addressed issues of cultural values and moral decadence in our immediate society and by extension Africa. Holistically, our findings reveal that Africans themselves are contributors to the erosion of cultural values that have led to moral degeneration in our society because they value alien culture instead of that of Africa. We also find that the quest for material wealth is a major source of moral decadence in Africa. Toni Duruaku through his works has pinpointed myriads of cultural misdirection and moral decay in Africa, using his immediate culture to speak to Africa at large. As Awosanmi (2007, pp.22-23) also observes "a conditional socio-political replication has consistently occurred in African countries such that while a writer may be addressing his own country's specific problems, he is by extension speaking to a continent-wide situational disaster". By this, we believe that Toni

Duruaku uses a part to represent a whole to launch Africa to a better and stronger society.

Consequently, this paper recommends that theatre practitioners should use their media to educate the populace on the danger of denigrating one's culture and moral ethics, using folkloric dramatic media to keep aglow the campaign for good morals and values in our schools. Our views resonate with that of Omotosho (2013, p.52) who notes that: "Folktales are used to teach children and adults moral lessons about life".

There should also be a law to checkmate indecent dressings in Africa, to get rid of immorality associated with indecent dressing while parents should wake up from their slumber, ensure proper upbringing of their wards instead of pursuing excessive materialism and wealth, which if acquired can only be sustained by their children.

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