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Beyond Creativity: The New Historicist's Lens

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Abstract

Literature is life and literary creators often times employ real-life happenings as resources in their creative ventures. Thus, such literary works could educate on aspects of life that serve as resources in literary creativity. Such phenomenon resonates with the utilitarian view that literature must have a specific function of education: morals, historical happenings of a group of people, rules, etc. This paper seeks to discuss some historical manifestations in some selected Ewe drama texts: *Tɔkɔ Atɔlia*, *Fia Yi Dziehe*, *Ewɔ Moya na Fiagã Agɔkɔli* and *Mede Ablotsidela*. The study is in five sections. Firstly, the introduction offers a general overview of the entire study while the second section discusses the data collection procedure. Sections three and four look at the theoretical premise and analysis of selected texts, where historical thrusts are revealed, respectively. The last section summarises and concludes the entire study.

Keywords: *literature, drama, drama texts, new historicism, life experiences, Ewe*



1.0 Introduction

According to Angmor (1996), “literature is life” (P.1). In effect, literary works express the day to day activities of human life. Lynn (2004) on his part considers literature as “something that speaks to humans, an important part of what connects people to the past, helps to grasp the present, and also sparks people to shape the future.” One argument that arises from Angmor (1996) and Lynn (2004)’s definitions and other definitions that align with theirs is the difference between literature and history/facts. Iyengar & Nandakumar (2009) drew a distinction between literature and history, revealing that history is concerned with particulars while poetry (Literature) imitates life; literary works are largely imitations of historical facts. Thus, history is concerned with facts while literature is make-believe and draws on historical facts as resources through the manipulation of language. Boulton (1979) argues that, “all plays need to be seen in relation to their historical background-the theatre of the time, the artistic standards of the time and the general mental and moral climate of the time’ (p.171). Baerber & Furniss (2006) in corroborating Boulton (1979) assert that texts do not have exclusively specific textual origins but are produced within historical conditions and linked to a variety of other texts with the spectrum of literary history. The above submissions support the assertion that most literary works, if not all, have manifestations of cultural and historical happenings of the place and time settings in which they are created. Most of Shakespeare’s literary works are evidences that literature employs historical facts as resources. Hopkins (2005) through an analysis of *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar* confirmed that these drama texts amply exhibit themes that are derived from socio – political events and ideologies of the time. Angmor (2010) on the other hand reviews Ben Abdallah’s *The Trial of Ilya* and concludes that ‘The writing purports to present the dictatorial aspect of Nkrumah’s rule as evident in his exercise of the Preventive Detention Act of 1958’ (p.161). Other studies have also revealed that the socio-cultural and historical happenings of a people serve as resources for literary creativity, thus, this work analyses *Tɔkɔ Atɔli*, *Fia Yi Dzieh*, *Ewɔ Moya na Fiagã Agɔkɔli* and *Mede Ablotsidela* to unearth some historical happenings of the E3e of Ghana, to further demonstrate the relationship between historical events and literary creativity.

2.0 Theoretical Background

This study is grounded in Stephen Greenblatt’s New Historicism theory. Also known as Poetics of Culture, the New Historicism literary theory emerged in the late 1970s and developed in the 1980’s in revolt against the marginalization of literature by traditional historians and the enshrinement of literary texts in a timeless dimension beyond history. The New Historicism theory seeks to reveal the relationship between texts and their

sociohistorical contexts. It embraces the fact that literary works operate in time and place in which they are written and should be studied from that perspective. Tyson (1999) postulates that, 'Like the dynamic interplay between individuals and society, literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical context.' (p.289). Tyson's submission further confirms the earlier discussion that historical events and literary works are mutually constitutive; they create and complement each other. New historicists aim at understanding literary texts through their historical context. A New Historicism approach to literary analysis therefore requires further reading of historical writings to corroborate their manifestations in the literary texts. Tyson (1999) and Pieters (2001) are both literary analysts that employed the New Historicism theory in analyzing *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Tempest* and Strachey's *Bermuda's Pamphlet* by Shakespeare respectively. In the *The Great Gatsby*, Tyson showed reflections of the discourse of the self-made man that both shape and were shaped by American culture during the final decades of the twentieth century' (p.262) that were circulated in the texts that were under consideration. Tyson's analysis revealed the strong influence that historical space and time have on the thematic concerns of literary works while Pieters identified and discussed an unfortunate shipwreck of a British vessel on its way to the colony of Jamestown in Virginia in 1609 and some political and ideological scenarios among others in *The Tempest* and *Bermuda's Pamphlet* respectively.

3.0 Text Analysis

Ewɔ Moya na Fiagã Agɔkɔli (1973), *Fia Yi Dziehe* (1973), *Mede Ablotsidela* (1974) and *Tɔkɔ Atɔlia* (1981) are Ewe drama texts with themes bordering on punishment, marriage and obedience. *Fia Yi Dziehe* and *Tɔkɔ Atɔlia* were written by F.K. Fiawoo while *Ewɔ Moya na Fiagã Agɔkɔli* and *Mede Ablotsidela* were authored by S.Y. Kwamuar and Bidji Setsoafia respectively. With major characters such as Fiagã Agɔkɔli, Fia Tomasenu, Esinam and Agbebaɖa, the authors introduced and developed the various themes, employing various cultural and historical happenings as resources in the process. The ensuing paragraphs, via the New Historicism theory discuss some Ewe historical happenings that served as resources in the creation of the drama texts under study. The first instance of historical happening being employed as a resource is the Nyikɔ system of punishment that was meted out to the tragic heroes, Agbebaɖa and Fia Tomasenu, on counts of incessant deceit, adultery, and indebtedness in *Tɔkɔ Atɔlia* and *Fia yi Dziehe* respectively. Historically, the 'nyikɔ' system was used to punish high degree crimes such as murder, homicide and repeated rebellion against counsel among the Anɔ Ewe. (Gbologah, 1996, Abotchie, 1997). Explaining the system vividly, Abotchie (1997) clarifies that the 'nyikɔ' system is executed in two

modes. The first method involves clubbing the victim to death while the second entails burying the victim alive up to his neck, exposing his face to the mercy of beasts or birds of prey. Agbebaḍa, in *Tɔkɔ Atɔlia* suffered this fate when he was convicted of the crimes he was accused of. Agbebaḍa revealed this in Act V, Scene V when he lamented:

Ekem ɔe miedzo le gbonye vava? AƐ vu gā ɔi ɔe nye ta dziƐ Wofo nyikɔ ɔe dzinyea? Miedim ɔe do me agbagbe, eye nye ta pɛ koe tsi gota. Tsikɔ de asim wuwum me xo. Edze nyunye enumake. Amegānye gblɔe nam, eye nyagānye ɔo nyku edzi nam, gake nyemedo toe na wo o...

This translates thus:

They have left me and the great drum sounds for me. Buried alive and only my head left free! Already, thirst begins. Alas that I gave no heed to my father and my mother!... (The Fifth Landing Stage, Act V, Scene, IV)

His wailing shows that one of the two forms of the *nyikɔ* punishment as revealed in Abotchie (1997) was meted out to him. Similarly, Fia Tomasenu was also given the *nyikɔ* punishment in Act III, Scene II. Sename, Fia Tomasenu's wife soliloquized:

*Mido tol! De wodzo hoa? Aa! Kpɔ nyuie tso ahu si le tsatsram to angbawo dzi la nyu. Esi Kalɛdzi gblɔ ale fe nya siawoa, meyi sāa. Gake mebu be tsidzadza si le angbawo mee wówɔnɛa. Eɔ ɔe, nukata wóakpɔ nyuie le ahu nyu le fiɛ me ɔo?
... Yoo, mihede nyuie he! (Fia Yi Dziehe.)*

To wit:

Ah! Are they gone already? "Beware of the dewy leaves". When Kaledzi spoke these words, I was taken aback, but then I thought he was referring to trickles of rain on the branches. But why talk of dew in the evening? ... Well, good-bye!

Sename's soliloquy presents a different form of the nyikɔ punishment that has not been captured in Abotchie's exposé. From the reading of earlier scenes and speeches of characters, one finds out that Fia Tomasenu was lured by his trusted friend to an unknown place. Fia Tomasenu's punishment is not clearly spelt out as seen in Agbebaɖa's case. His punishment is shrouded in secrecy as a result of his "chief" status. Among the Aɲlɔ, chiefs are regarded as custodians of the land as well as representatives of both the ancestors and citizens alike. Thus, they are not to be scowled or disgraced publicly. However, the belief is that, a despotic chief is lured to a place that is unknown to the citizenry, to be sold, killed or buried alive. In as much as Agbebaɖa was sent to "tɔkɔ atɔlia" whereas Fia Tomasenu was believed to have been sent to "dziehe", both were punished through the nyikɔ punishment (Segbedzi, 2012). Another conspicuous historical event that is incorporated into a literary work is the tyrannical rule of the ancient Ewe king, Agɔkɔli in *Ewɔ Moya na Fiagã Agɔkɔli*. This drama enacts the migration of the Ewes from Ɗɔtsie due to the tyrannical rule of the then king, Agɔkɔli. In his introductory remarks, Kwamuar states the theme (content) of the drama, saying:

'The book 'Ewɔ Moya Na Fiagã Agɔkɔli' is a drama about the migration of the ancestors of the Ewes from Notsie in the Republic of Togo. The decision to move out of Notsie was necessitated by the excessive wickedness displayed against them by Fiagã Agorkoli.' (Ewɔ Moya Na Fiagã Agɔkɔli, p.III).

Ameevor (1994) recounts that the Aɲlɔ migrated from Ɗɔtsie around 1474 as a result of the tyrannies of Agɔkɔli. Amenumey (1986) also confirmed the wickedness of Agɔkɔli that necessitated the migration of the people. According to him:

The early kings of Notsie ruled well and the kingdom expanded. Trouble began when king Agokoli ascended the throne. He was tyrannical and wicked. As his rule became unbearable, various groups of the population decided to take to the road once again to flee from his harshness. ..p.3).

As the drama progresses, one sees evidences of the activities prior to the day of migration: from throwing of water against the wall to soften it to walking backwards on their way out so as not to be easily traced (*Ewɔ Moya Na Fiagã Agɔkɔli*, Act V, p.42). Weduahlor (2004) states that, 'as the Ewe prepared to escape, it was decided that women

should throw water against the wall to weaken it, and make it easy to perforate.’(pp.6,7). Evidences in the drama *Ewɔ Moya na Fiagã Agɔkɔli* corroborate the accounts of Amenumey (1986), Ameevor (1994), and Weduahlor (2004), thus, demonstrate that literary creators incorporate historical events into their works as being argued in this study. The literariness of these works however is seen in the artistic use of language for beauty and form.

According to oral traditions, the Ewe who settle in Aɔɔlgã later sent emissaries to Ɔɔtsie to retrieve the stool for their king and this is captured in *Fia Yi Dziehe* (*Fia Yi Dziehe*, Act III, Scene IV, p.292). *Mede Ablotsidela* was written in 1974, a little after Ghana’s independence (Fosu and Aryeetey, 2006, Apter, 2008), and Setsoafia explores events that characterized the time and milieu in the development of his drama. One of the major characters, Dadzi, alludes to this in act I when he says:

NukaE Nye Mensa Dadzi nyemakpɔ wuiski mí kple xɔnyewo míano, akpɔ dzidzɔ le nye Ghana fe ɖokuisinɔnɔxɔxɔɔɔkekewo ɖuɖu me o! Nya ka gblɔm Ofori le? Ɖe nyemele nye fewo xem nɛ oa? (Mede Ablotsidela, Act I, Scene I, p.11).

This is to say that:

What! I, Mensa Dadzi will not get whisky for my friends and I, to make merry and celebrate my Ghana’s independence. What is Ofori talking about? Don’t I pay my debts?

Dadzi again alludes to the independence fervor when he soliloquises and asks God to help the ‘new born’ country. He says:

...Hm. Mawu gãwo, mikpe ɖe Ghana dukɔ sue yeye si dze agbe yeye gɔme fifia la ɲu dzro! ... (Mede Ablotsidela, Act I, Scene I, p.12).

This translates as:

Hm, great gods, help this small country Ghana that has just begun a new life.

“Yeye” (new) in the above extract metaphorically refers to Ghana, as a newborn country and the commencement of a new era of governance. In addition to the instances above, the general atmosphere that characterised the new administration of the independence era is represented in *Mede Ablotsidela*. In Act II, Scene I, the Accra Drivers Association embarks on a demonstration to the Town Clerk to register their dissatisfaction of their working conditions. This occurrence is post-colonial as governance during the pre-independence era was autocratic (Fosu and Aryeetey, 2006). As postulated by Iyengar and Nandakumar (2009), ‘the ‘material’ of literature is usually provided by the age.’ (p.8). This gives the drama some authenticity and verisimilitude (very similar to life).

4.0 Conclusion

What this paper has done is to discuss the historical thrust to literary works, focusing on four Ewe drama texts: *Ewɔ Moya na Fiagã Agɔkɔli* (1973), *Fia Yi Dziehe* (1973), *Mede Ablotsidela* (1974) and *Tɔkɔ Atɔlia* (1981). Employing the New Historicism theory, the paper revealed how literary creators engage historical happenings as resources in their literary creativity in the drama texts that were studied. In *Ewɔ Moya na Fiagã Agɔkɔli* (1973) and *Fia Yi Dziehe* (1973), events that characterized the migration of the Ewes from Tɔtsie were evident. It also came to light that, Ghana’s post-independence activities were amply used and alluded to in *Mede Ablotsidela* (1974) while the nyikɔ system of punishment of the Aɔli Ewe was greatly evident in *Tɔkɔ Atɔlia* (1981) and *Fia yi Dziehe*. The conclusion drawn from the analysis is that literary works have historical dimensions; therefore history and literature, to a large extent, complement each other. Thus, the inculcation of historical events in literary works is one means of educating people on historical happenings, which supports the utilitarian view that literature must educate. This, however, does not in any way put history and literature at par. While the former says and narrates events exactly as they happen, the latter uses language artistically to bring out the same information.

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