

African Culture and
Performance Dynamics
in the Dramaturgy of
AbdulRasheed Abiodun Adeoye



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Seeking Classical Parallels in AbdulRasheed Adeoye's Collective Characterisation: An Examination of Neo-Alienation's Eclecticism



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Introduction

In his notes on the aesthetics of the style and theatre of Neo-Alienation as contained in *The Smart Game* (2009), AbdulRasheed Adeoye the designer of the experimental theatre describes neo-Alienation as 'a product of the undying love for Brechtian aesthetics and other glaring loopholes created by Brecht's alienation effect' (p. vi). To achieve this, the playwright says that he fuses two dramatic styles from two separate cultures-the African festival theatre and Brecht's epic theatre - into a performance motif.

One would be correct to say that the name of this experimental theatre i.e. Neo-Alienation easily references Brecht because of the word 'alienation' which is a term associated with Brechtian theatre. One would also not be too far wrong to assume that because of the name of the creator of Neo-Alienation who is African in origin, Neo-Alienation would also exhibit influences of African total theatre. This is true because the works of majority of African playwrights across generations - from Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Hussein Ibrahim, Efua Sutherland, Ola Rotimi through to Tessy Onwueme, Ahmed Yerima, Sunnie Ododo - have shown influences of the African theatrical styles in various forms. Consequently, the works of African playwrights are influenced in various degrees by Western and African dramatic conventions. But what is the degree of the eclecticism in Neo-Alienation?

The concern in this paper is to seek a parallel between certain aspects of Neo-Alienation and another equally well-known dramatic convention - Classicism. In this regard, focus will be on Adeoye's presentation of his collective actors in *The Smart Game* (2009) and of other aesthetics as contained in the playwright's notes on the aesthetics of Neo-Alienation. It must be noted that the playwright insists that Neo-Alienation is more a theatre of performance rather than a theatre of literature. As an acknowledgment of this, it should be

pointed out that the analysis of the actors done here is not be affected by this dichotomy.

Neo-Alienation: The Aesthetics and Classicism

Brecht's influence over African playwrights like Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Bode Sowande is well documented. These playwrights including earlier ones like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and John Pepper Clark have equally illustrated the influence of their indigenous African culture and its dramatic style in their various works. This is true also of Abdulrasheed Adeoye's experimental theatre, Neo-Alienation.

Brecht's episodic theatre which is an aesthetic shared with African indigenous theatre and Brecht's utilitarian perspective of theatre which addresses social and political issues especially as they affect the masses, are major areas that have no doubt influenced Adeoye in his own theatre which he has termed Neo-Alienation. However, the point of departure between Neo-Alienation and Brechtian aesthetics is Neo-Alienation's resistance of Brecht's Alienation Effect. Adeoye calls attention to Stanislavsky in his (Stanislavsky's) adoption of Aristotle's principle of empathy and the African festival theatre as influences in his (Adeoye's) own Neo- Alienation. Consequently, the playwright in his notes in *The Smart Game* (2009), emphatically states that Neo-Alienation is a theatre of 'realistic happenings' where 'everything happening in the theatre should be seen as "the exact picture of the original"'.

The audiences are also temporarily and aesthetically admonished to suspend their disbelief (p. viii). This is one area which the playwright says is admittedly Classical (pp iv& vii). Describing Neo-Alienation as a theatre of multiple actions, Adeoye postulates twelve aesthetic possibilities for its structure. Of these, four (i.e. one third) can be said to have parallels in Classicism. These are:

1. The Aesthetic of Theme Song of Audience / Players' Systemic Fraternisation – the Greek Chorus is believed to function as an ideal audience expressing the community's and sometimes the playwright's views (Schlegel, 1846/2004, p. 50 and Brockett and Brockett, 1979, Introduction, p. x).
2. Multiple Role-playing Aesthetics – Greek actors Played more than ne role. This was done by a change of mask and costume (Damen, 2012. Section 2, Chapter 6)
3. The multiple narrators' Aesthetics- this can be likened to the Greek Chorus whose functions included commenting on the play and giving information necessary for the audiemce's understanding. Weiner (1980) refers to the Greek Chorus as a 'collective character'(p.206) even though he argues unconvincingly that their role was more theatrical than dramatic. However, we adopt his terminology as it will be useful in our description of a similar character in

Adeoye's *The Smart Game* (2009).

4. Trado-modern Dance Aesthetics – the Greek Chorus was believed to have sung its speech dancing. Aristotle traces the origin of Greek theatre (tragedy) to the dithyramb sung during the religious and civic festivals in honour of Dionysus. The Greek meanings of terms such as 'tragedy', 'chorus', 'ode' and 'orchestra' are all tied to song and dance (Damen, 2012, Section 1, Chapter 4).

In further describing the theatre of Neo-Alienation, Adeoye says there are three types of audiences: the primary audience which pay to watch the performance; the stage audience who will stay permanently on the stage to many play roles in the play; and then there is the last audience who will join the primary audience to perform as audience members and return to the stage. The focus in this paper is on the second and third types of audiences who are also actors in the play. An analysis of these audiences in Adeoye's *The Smart Game* (2009) will form the topic of discussion in the next sub-section.

The Audiences in *The Smart Game*

Of his plays, *The Smart Game* best illustrates Adeoye's Neo-Alienation aesthetics; in fact the play has the sub-title "A 'Neo-Alienation' Script". The play highlights social problems which arise from the activities of an inept and corrupt political leadership. These problems include poverty, prostitution, HIV/AIDS. The play revolves a family of four – a poor farmer Oloriebi (father); his wife, Ebun; son Gbenga; and daughter, Kike. Oloriebi is poor, not because as a farmer, he is not hardworking but 'the money will not just be enough' (p. 11) especially to a wife such as Ebun who hankers after the good and bright things of life. This brings conflict into the home and while Gbenga supports his father, Kike takes after the mother. Ebun, with the help of her friend, Nike, seeks these things outside her home by having an affair with a corrupt businessman Chief Olowolayemo. Meanwhile, Chief Olowolayemo wants to forcefully take over Oloriebi's land. Chief Olowolayemo tricks Ebun into using magic i.e 'touch and die' (p. 41) to kill her husband in order to have her (Ebun) and Oloriebi's land to himself. Eventually, Ebun finds out she contracts HIV from Chief Olowolayemo and uses the same magic to kill him.

The entire cast of *The Smart Game* can be said to be one collective actor as they open the play by coming on stage together and it is from this collective (stage audience) that the individual actors (player audience) to play such roles as Oloriebi, etc are picked. It is instructive to note that this set of characters remain on stage for the duration of the play. The player audience also dissolves back into the stage audience at the end of the play. The playwright specifically instructs that 'the stage audience will stay permanently on the stage' (p.viii).

categorically about the Chorus and its function in Classical drama more so as Aristotle did not focus on it. However, he cites Horace's view of the Chorus as including 'a general expression of moral sympathy, exhortation, instruction, and warning.' Much like the Classical Chorus also, this character also forms the orchestra by singing the songs in the play. It must be mentioned that Adeoye's presentation of the collective characters ingeniously integrates the Brechtian and African theatrical conventions alongside the Classical to give it a distinct quality. Areas which present differences with the Classical Chorus are areas that exhibit either the Brechtian or African theatrical conventions.

Conclusion

The aim in this paper was to closely examine the Classical influences in AbdulRasheed Adeoye's *The Smart Game*, the play of his that best exhibit's his Neo-Alienation theatrical style, an eclectic experimental theatre heavily influenced by Brechtian and African theatrical conventions. Its creator however, limits any Classical influence to Neo-Alienation's emphasis on empathy. The aim of this article was achieved through an analysis of Adeoye's presentation of his collective character or what he calls the audiences. The analysis revealed a parallel with the Classical Chorus.

Thus, the Classical influence in Neo-Alienation cannot be limited to empathy which Adeoye stresses as a feature of Neo-Alienation. Consequently, the eclecticism that is a feature of Neo-Alienation is more than would be assumed simply from the name of the theatre, Neo-Alienation (which references Brecht) and also from the name and birthplace of its creator which reference Africa. The paper has shown that Classicism plays some significant role in this experimental theatre.

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