LITERARY THEATRE RECEPTION IN NIGERIA DURING THE PERIOD
1948 TO 2010: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

BY
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REG. NO: PG/Ph.D/00/28161

A Ph.D THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF POST GRADUATE
STUDIES IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE AWARD
OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (Ph.D) IN THEATRE
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This thesis has been approved for the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife and children who inspired me.
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I thank the Almighty God for giving me the strength and guidance to complete this work. My special gratitude goes to Professor Emeka Nwabueze who charted the course of success for me in this academic task. Prof. I thank you. You are really a father and a mentor to me.

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I must say bravo to my wife for her understanding and unalloyed support while I ran around to pursue this project. My loving children, it is all over, and we must forge ahead.

May I thank all my relations and friends as I say to all, the good news is hereby presented.
ABSTRACT

The study examined the critical perceptions of Nigerian literary theatre. Regarding some play texts and their authors as largely poorly received, attempts were made to trace the factors that led to poor perception of such plays, suggest solutions, and highlight the features that encouraged better responses. Employed in the study, were interviews held with experienced theatre practitioners and theatre critics. Internet sources and other textual studies were also employed. The findings of the study point to the fact that ideological, aesthetic, dramaturgical, philosophical and psychological factors led to poor perception. Other reasons were sociological, historical and commercial. Specifically, the imposition of the Marxist socialist ideology, the employment of the western theatre aesthetics that were devoid of relevant African cultural idioms, involvement of dramaturgical obscurities, possession of philosophical visions that are individualistic or bourgeois oriented, and psychological contradictions of theatre among the literate public, were some of the factors that encouraged poor perception. The study arrived at the conclusion that these factors of poor reception have only been scantily tackled, hence, more room was left for greater discoveries towards improving reception. The study also concluded that in addition to Nigerian public’s lack of psychological orientation towards appreciating drama texts, there was a yawning lacuna due to the failure of playwrights and national leaders to solve the socio political hindrances, cultural incongruities, political and commercial set-backs that encouraged critical condemnations. Attention was therefore, drawn to this existing gap and fresh suggestions were made to playwrights, researchers and all makers of theatre towards enhancing reception.
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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The term literary theatre suggests the notion of performance art as “the tradition of great writers, of texts inspired by and inspiring other texts ….” (Jeyifo 62). Although valid, this account of the art is inadequate. Literary theatre, then, can be defined as that tradition of the performance art that began in antiquity through the dramatic inscriptions on the tombs of deceased Egyptian Pharaohs, and the writings of classical Greek tragedians like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. While the former were staged as passage rites for the dead Pharaohs, the latter were produced on the Greek theatre during the tragic contests of the 5th century B.C. With this writing quality of drama and its staging possibilities the performance art began to acquire its nomenclature of literary theatre.

The writing tradition of the classical Greece which was later adopted in ancient Rome continued after the antiquity through the ages to the modern period. During these years, as a written phenomenon, written drama acquired more feathers as a discipline in academic institutions, and a creative talent outside the educational realm. Hence, as a written text that can be produced on the stage of a theatre, as an academic study in the art of playwriting, and as a creative writing outside the realm of academics, drama becomes literary theatre par excellence.

This theatre is distinguished from the traditional and unwritten theatre forms which are oral, but supply raw materials for and may exist contemporaneously with the literary tradition. In Nigeria, literary theatre, therefore, refers to the practice of playwriting, the corpus of play texts written,
published or found in Nigeria, within or outside the universities and beyond, such as Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel*, J. P. Clark’s *Ozidi*, Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to Blame*, Femi Osofisan’s *Chattering and the Song*, Emeka Nwabueze’s *Guardian of the Cosmos* and Sam Ukala’s *Akpakaland*. Literary theatre also encompasses the formal training activities of theatre arts departments in the institutions of higher learning. In Nigeria, examples of tertiary institutions that operate such activities are:

- University of Ibadan (UNIBADAN)
- University of Ife (UNIFE)
- University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN)
- University of Jos (UNIJOS)
- University of PortHarcourt (UNIPORT)
- University of Lagos (UNILAG)
- Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU)
- University of Calabar (UNICAL)
- Benue State University, Makurdi (BENSU)
- University of Benin (UNIBEN)
- Delta State University, Abraka (DELSU).

Creative writings outside the universities, which are also esteemed as literary theatre, are exemplified by Ogali A. Ogali’s play *Veronica My Daughter*, Ene Henshaw’s *This is Our Chance*.

Foreign drama texts and the adaptations of some of them which have been found in Nigeria as literary texts in secondary schools, study materials in tertiary institutions, and reading materials among the Nigerian public are examples of
literary theatre. They include European classics like *The Bacchae* by Euripides; *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles; *Taming the Shrew* by Shakespeare; *Dr Faustus* by Marlowe.

### 1.1 A Historical Overview of Literary Theatre in Nigeria

Literary theatre in Nigeria during the period 1948 to 2010 presented a clear background for the examination of its reception. This background falls into stages, beginning with events that transpired prior to the incursion of educational theatre in Nigeria. The first period dated from 1880s to 1948. The second stage falls between 1948 and 1963, when the seed of educational theatre was planted in University College, Ibadan. Sprouting as the School of Drama, this ‘tendril’ developed significantly between 1963 and 1970, and since then, one could count back on various literary enterprises that deserved the nomenclature of literary theatre.

Continuing with greater energy towards theatre and drama, the educational theatre, between 1970 and 1990, recorded tremendous success in terms of the increased number of academic theatre departments and reputable actors. The period also manifested an ideological development in theatre, featuring the Marxist radical ideology and Bertolt Brecht’s revolutionary aesthetic.

Between 1990 and 2010, a new tendency towards radicalism arose, reflecting the recent post-independence theatre trends in Nigeria. These include the new ‘folkist’ aesthetics being popularized by Sam Ukala, the non-Brechtian, non-Marxist dramaturgical approaches to sociopolitical struggle experimented by Emeka Nwabueze, and Tess Onwueme’s radical innovations in the feminist
aesthetics. These trends are elaborated on, here, to create a clearer picture of the subject of this study.

Prior to the founding of the University College, Ibadan and its associated theatrical and dramatic activities, and dating from pre-colonial times, numerous non-academic (non educational) performances had provided theatrical atmosphere in Nigeria. These ranged from the traditional African performance genres like the masquerade, story telling and ritual displays, to theatrical and dramatic activities that characterized the early colonial period since the close of 19th century, including the Western and European forms of the concert and drama, church dramatic entertainments, like annual end-of-year performances and theatrical displays in the church.

In 1882, there was a performance of Moliere’s *He Would Be a Lord* and the presentation of D.A Oloyede’s *King Elejigbo* and *Princess Abeje of Kotangora* performed by the Egbe Ife at the Bethel African Church School Room and the Glover Memorial Hall in 1902 and 1904 respectively. According to David Kerr, “for nearly two decades this theatrical atmosphere prevailed until the emergence of a Syncretic Popular Theatre” (72), known as the Yoruba Opera founded by Hubert Ogunde in 1946.

In the 1940s theatrical and dramatic writing that was classed as Onitsha Market Literature, which pioneered literary writing in drama and prose, emerged and had avid readership. According to Emmanuel Obiechina, in his book, *An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets*, the first popular pamphlets of the literature appeared in Onitsha in 1947. Describing the pamphlets as material for popular audience, he appraises them “as integral, if
unique and startling, part of the West African creative scene” (1). Furthermore, Obiechina opines that “in quite another sense, the existence of popular pamphleteering in Onitsha has had an important bearing on the emergence of the novel in Nigeria”, and maintains that the literature served as “a sign of general literary awakening of which the novel is one of the highest achievements. To demonstrate the receptivity of critics towards the Onitsha Market Pamphlets, Obiechina notes that commentaries appeared in important journals concerning the literature (as will be shown later in this work).

In his foreword to Obiechina’s book, Chinua Achebe describes the Onitsha Market Works as amazing pamphlet literature which is indeed a phenomenon of consuming interest whether as literature or as sociology. Further, Achebe opines that,

Dr. Obiechina takes the authors and their works seriously enough…. This seriousness is necessary because the authors are concerned not to provide exotic entertainment but to tackle seriously in the light of their own perception, the social problems of a somewhat mixed up but dynamic, even brash, modernizing community. In this connection, Dr. Obiechina’s comparison of this literature with similar phenomena in Elizabethan and eighteenth-century England is apt and revealing (x).

Obiechina and Achebe here sharply enunciate the significant position of Onitsha Market Literature in the beginnings of literary drama and the novel in Nigeria. The seriousness of these pamphlets as part of the literary drama discussed here is therefore too obvious to be contested.
Hence, lamenting the apparent neglect of Onitsha Market Literature, Yemi Ogunbiyi states that:

Although hardly mentioned in the studies of Nigerian drama, and with condescending tolerance, if at all yet as dramatic literature, Onitsha market plays provide us with useful insights into the meaning of the lives of an important segment of a part of the society (25).

Ogunbiyi rightly points out that Onitsha Market Literature has been ascribed with the quality of providing “clues towards understanding the earliest forms of contemporary Nigerian literary drama” such as Igu’s *John in the Romance of True Love*... and Ogali’s *Veronica My Daughter* (25-26). These works include Ene Henshaw’s well constructed and more popular play- *This is Our Chance*.

Though some critics argue that Onitsha Market Literature has scanty literary merit, it is necessary to state that it provides the necessary illuminating force in the history and evolution of Nigerian literary theatre before the incursion of theatre in the universities. Thus, prior to the incursion of educational theatre, which is viewed here as the precursor and forerunner of critically acknowledged literary theatre in Nigeria, there were already in existence, traditional performance, western forms of drama and concert, annual end of year performances in some churches. Other theatrical features that existed were the Yoruba Opera, and the Onitsha Market Literature. These plays served as source materials for literary theatre that was later to be nurtured by the educational theatre.
Since the university was the progenitor of the evolution of literary theatre in Nigeria, a brief excursion into the establishment of Theatre Arts in the university system is necessary. The first account of the evolution of theatre in Nigerian university system was given by J.A. Adedeji in his inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan on Friday, 27th October, 1978. According to him, “the emergence of the theatre as a discipline in the University of Ibadan has not been in isolation of the history of its own heritage”(6). He posits that the emergence of theatre as a curricular subject in the university has also been a tardy but eventful process. Continuing, he opines that,

The philosophy of education in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries … was expected to serve as an index for the adoption of drama as a curricular subject …. Schools at Hellas in ancient Greece where the western theatre movement began as a cultural and creative force had taken the theatre as a discipline quite seriously and had regarded it as an education which the select Athenian youths must have. The monastery schools and divine institutions of medieval Europe, regarded as the progenitor of the university on the other hand, could not identify with the theatre because its form and attributes had blossomed from heathen festivals (3).

In his inaugural lecture titled *In the Spirit of Thespis: The Theatre Arts and National Integration* and delivered at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka on Thursday, 30th June, 2005, Emeka Nwabueze recounts the evolution of theatre as an academic discipline. According to him,
Theatre as an academic discipline received its first impetus in the United States of America. The earliest known intrusion of drama into the university system was pioneered in 1906 by George Pierce Baker at Harvard University. Baker started teaching drama in one of his classes, English 47, which he eventually renamed 47 workshop. He later made a proposal for the establishment of a department of drama in Harvard, but the university saw the venture as experimental and the proposal was unsuccessful. In 1914, Thomas Wood Stevens established first degree programme in drama at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pitsburg, Pennsylvania. In 1924, with an endowment by Edward S. Harkness, Yale University established a drama programme in the school of the Fine Arts. George Piece Baker happily migrated to Yale the following year to head the new department (12-13).

Nwabueze further notes that the situation, with regard to the creation of academic theatre, in England, was different from the above. According to him, dramatic activities were readily welcomed and were officially recognized in 1855. It was also in this year that the Oxford University Dramatic Society was formed, thereby boosting the fortunes of drama in Europe (13).

In 1950, with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation of New York, the University of Bristol established and inaugurated the first department of drama in an English University. The man instrumental to the birth of the department was Professor Glynne Wickham, and to show his intellectual attachment to the discipline,
he promptly gave his inaugural lecture, thus becoming the first professor to give an inaugural lecture in Theatre in British University. Incidentally when the drama programme was established in the University College, Ibadan, Professor Wickham was appointed the first External Examiner in Drama (Nwabueze 14).

The emergence of educational theatre in Nigeria started at the University College, Ibadan – which was affiliated to the University of London. The idea of introducing educational theatre into the University College, initially appeared hopeless because the parent institution – the University of London – created policies that ruled out the study of drama as an aspect of liberal education in Ibadan (Adedeji 7). Despite these problems, Kenneth Mellanby, the first principal, went ahead to include a plan for an Open Air Theatre in the plan of the permanent site of the University (7). Events that immediately followed Mellanby’s bold vision culminated in the building of an Arts Theatre designed as a place for open lectures, concerts, and film shows, instead of the earlier envisioned open air structure.

In 1956, Geoffrey Axworthy – a product of Oxford University Dramatic Society (O.U.D.S) arrived the University College to serve as a lecturer in the English department. This development impacted on the speed and direction of events that instituted the educational theatre in Nigeria via the University College at Ibadan. J. Adeyinka Adedeji paid tribute to him as a figure
to whom our generation of Nigerian theatre artists owe eternal gratitude, whose indefatigable spirit has been and continues to be our source of inspiration and the mainstay of our ventures (9).

This can be justified by his other great contributions to the incursion of educational theatre in the University College, and Nigeria at large. His efforts resulted in the approval of a management committee – the Arts Theatre Management Committee (A.T.M.C) - to manage the Arts Theatre, and move its activities forward. This committee encouraged the emergence of amateur drama groups in the university, which Adedeji described as the University College Dramatic Society (a student group) and the Arts Theatre Production Group (8). Ogunbiyi refers to this as a group of expatriates, mainly university teachers and civil servants resident in Ibadan, who rallied their Nigerian friends and colleagues together and organized the theatre group (28).

The Arts Theatre Management Committee’s efforts also led to the formal opening of the School of Drama in October, 1963,

A feat which coincided with the inauguration of the University of Ibadan as an independent and autonomous institution of higher learning … which was consigned to offering ancillary courses to few named degree courses in the faculty and approved to award diploma certificates to its own sub-degree programme in Drama (11).

The School of Drama on 1st October, 1970 became a full-fledged Department of Theatre Arts.
From the preceding narration, it becomes obvious that the seed of educational theatre was planted in 1948 – following the inception of the University College Ibadan. The seed sprouted with the arrival of Geoffrey Axworthy in 1956, and became firmly rooted in 1970. Getting thus far, the educational theatre, through its academic pursuits and versatile involvement in the practice of literary theatre and drama, created a niche as a fountain of inspiration for renowned literary dramatists like Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Zulu Sofola, and Dapo Adelugba, who have had one experience or the other – either as students, staff or visiting scholars – with the institution. The contributions of the educational theatre in the making of literary theatre can be enunciated, beginning with the activities of the University of Ibadan, Dramatic Society.

Between 1948 and 1958, the Nigeria literary theatre was predominantly European oriented. Since 1958, when Wole Soyinka’s *Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* were produced under the aegis of the University’s Dramatic Society, and directed by theatre directors like Kenneth Post and Geoffrey Axworthy, traces of African oriented works of Nigerian playwrights started to appear, including J.P. Clark’s *Song of a Goat*, *Ozidi*, and *The Masquerade*. The productivity of the School of Drama, as well as the encouragement derived from the attainment of political Independence in 1960, promoted more seriousness and prolificity in playwriting, leading to increased fame of the first notable generation of (Nigerian) playwrights, “such as Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Wale Ogunyemi, Kalu Uka and Zulu Sofola” (Kofoworola I). These playwrights, particularly Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi and Zulu Sofola share the credit for writing plays that reflect the traditional African cultural elements. Such plays
are Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*, J.P. Clark’s *Ozidi*, Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not Blame*, and Zulu Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods*

The events of preceding years provided impetus for other developments in the post war era-1970 and beyond. These include the increase in the number of theatre departments in Nigerian universities, the spread of television drama, increase in critical writings on theatre, and the boom of home video. The educational theatre departments as created in University of Jos, University of Port Harcourt, University of Calabar, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Lagos have encouraged, if not produced, theatre practitioners whose practical approaches and theoretical outputs have opened new avenues of knowledge in the art of theatre.

described as revolutionary but not in the mould of Marxist aesthetics. A breed of radical writing also blossomed in the recent post-Independence period, such as Sam Ukala’s Folkist dramas like *Akpakaland* (2004) *The Slave Wife* (1982); Emeka Nwabueze’s *A Parliament of Vultures* (2000), *Guardian of the Cosmos* (1990); Ahmed Yerima’s *The Silent Gods* (1996). These plays have the impulse for identifying many of the socio-political problems of Nigeria, envisioning a course of action towards combating them and creating sociopolitical consciousness among the masses.

The foregoing overview has attempted to highlight the trends that constitute the literary theatre. These are:

- Theatre antecedents
- The educational theatre
- Playwriting
- Play production
- Theatre criticism

Theatre antecedents encompassed the traditional African performances which were followed by the European forms of early colonial and end of year drama performances in the church. These trends lasted from the pre-colonial period to the mid colonial era in 1946 when the Yoruba Opera blossomed alongside the Onitsha Market plays. One of the most impacting antecedents of literary theatre was the educational theatre, which started in Nigeria at the University College Ibadan in 1948 and later got introduced to other institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. This development marked a great boom in playwriting, play production, play acting, and theatre criticism. These aspects have developed in different
artistic directions today, thereby, giving rise to diverse critical perspectives that are considered in this study.

1.2  Statement of the Problem

    Literary theatre in Nigeria during the period 1948 to 2010 was so diversified and, therefore, attracted different kinds of critical perception. Nigerian playwrights have engaged in the writing of serious literary theatre of standard quality which deals with the multifaceted portrayal of the Nigerian state. The foremost precursors of literary theatre and their later counterparts had good intentions because they wrote to provide the reader with artistically admirable plays which deal with the historical, political and socioeconomic problems of the country. Despite all this, many of the written plays were dismissed by some critics as being substandard, due to what they describe as their numerous shortcomings. This study, therefore seeks to identify these shortcomings and proffer possible solutions. The study also seeks to discern the extent to which the critical incompetence of some critics contributed to the alarming rate of negative critical reception to which these plays were subjected.

    For proper execution of this study, the following research questions arose:

    • Who were the recipients of play texts?
    • What constituted the indices of poor reception?
    • What were the shortcomings of play texts?
    • What steps can be taken to combat the shortcomings?

1.3  Objective of the Study

    The objective of this study is to investigate the magnitude and causes of poor reception generated by many play texts in Nigeria during the period 1948 to
2010. While doing this, the study sought to proffer significant remedies to the anomalies that might have generated poor reception. It also aims at analyzing what constitutes inappropriate criticism, in order to put their qualities in proper perspective. The effect of history and socio-cultural factors on the negative critical reception of these plays will be discussed. Since negative criticism tends to have negative impact on the playwrights themselves, this study will ultimately help to advance the concepts of dramatic writing and criticism by making both playwrights and critics appreciate the negative and positive aspects of their artistic creation.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is of artistic, sociopolitical, economic and cultural utility to theatre practice in Nigeria, and hopefully, beyond. A historical research of this nature is a potent tool of information, education and reflection about the past, the present and helps in shaping the future. The study can therefore, be valued and utilized in many ways. First, it provides creditable information on the nature and development of literary theatre in Nigeria since the pre-colonial era. Second, it clarifies various contestable assumptions about Nigeria’s literary theatre. Third, the study provides an objective assessment and a clear perspective on the problems of literary theatre and suggests feasible remedies to the detected anomalies.

The study reveals fresh ideas, new concepts and innovative tendencies in playwriting which will be useful to researchers, critics, and theatre practitioners especially playwrights and theatre instructors in tertiary institutions. The final
product will be of tremendous use to playwrights, … and all categories of theatre practitioners.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

Most of the issues raised in this work, especially the answers advanced for the research questions, are premised on the theories of reader-response criticism. These theories, according to M.H. Abrams, “have come into prominence since the 1960s and share a common focus on the process of reading a literary text” (256). The theories agree that the meaning of a text is contingent on the reader’s interpretation of the text, and propose various forces that influence the reader’s textual appreciation. Writing on these critical modes, Richard Abcarian and Marvin Klotz state that the theories “focus on the interaction between the work and the reader, holding that, in a sense, a work exists only when it is experienced by the reader” (932).

The theories include what Charles Bressler in his book, Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice, identifies as ‘Structuralism’, ‘Phenomenology’ and ‘Subjective Criticism’ (63-69). These theories will be further illustrated later in this work. At any rate the arguments, assumptions and conclusions of this study are mainly premised on the idea that the meaning, quality and value of a play text depend on its interpretation by its critics, the readers, who are conceived as the recipients of the text. Such readers are expected to be competent in reading and using effective critical canons in appreciating the text. Canons, here, refer to such precepts as:

- The classical theories of Aristotle
- The neo-classical theories
The modernist concepts

Postmodernism

Neo-Aristotelian theories

The structuralist ideals

Post-structuralism

Formalism

Deconstruction

Freudian psychoanalytic theories

The Marxist revolutionary theories

1.6 Research Hypothesis

This hypothesis is segmented into three propositions. First, play texts that are read in Nigeria are largely poorly received due to their artistic, ideological and philosophical shortcomings, as well as of negative sociopolitical, cultural and historical influences. Second, paucity of competent readers and critics lead to incompetent and erroneous textual assessments, and third, Nigeria’s literary theatre can command a higher reception if fundamental innovations are effected in its form, structure, and techniques of composition; if the socio-political and economic conditions of the country are made more favourable to theatre practice, and if the critical tendencies and skills of readers and critics become better groomed.

1.7 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study analyses the critical responses of Nigerian play readers to written plays that had the qualities to serve as source materials in Nigeria’s academic institutions, and composed by established playwrights, theatre scholars
in tertiary institutions, and non-academic writers whose works were found to have standard literary qualities of plot, character, theme, language, and other artistic embellishments. Examples are the plays of classical Greek playwrights, such as *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, *The Frogs* by Aristophanes; English plays of the Elizabethan period, including *Hamlet* and *Taming the Shrew* by Shakespeare, Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and American plays like Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Eugene O’Neill’s *Emperor Jones* (1920). And modern Nigerian plays like *The Road, The Swamp Dwellers, The Trials of Brother Jero*, by Wole Soyinka; *Ozidi, Song of a Goat, The Raft* by J.P. Clark; and a host of others, including plays written by the recent post-independence playwrights like *A Parliament of Vultures, Guardian of the Cosmos and The Dragon’s Funeral* by Emeka Nwabueze.

The study focuses on selected samples from the authors listed above to represent the entire repertory in the country. Since the study concerned readers’ responses, attention was focused on play texts, their authors and their writing approaches. Due to lack of authentic information and statistical data, this study does not concern itself with the numerical strength of readers and critics. Well established Nigerian and European theatre critics like Yemi Ogunbiyi, J.A. Adedeji, Ahmed Yerima, James Gibbs, Eldred Jones, Martin Banham, Alain Ricard, were considered as sample readers whose opinions threw light on the quality of plays read in Nigeria.

Although literary theatre encompasses play texts and their production, this study elects to focus only on the former, thereby avoiding the later due to the fact that stage productions of plays are often an enhancement of the textual quality or a
degrading of it. Besides, audience reception is different from readers’ responses. While texts can directly generate readers, the stage does not directly do so but only generates ‘percipients’. The study does not deal with percipients or theatre goers whose critical opinions are often verbal and often extempore but not committed to print.

1.8 Research Methodology

This study is critical, analytical and historical. As a result it entails copious reading and analysis of texts, critical essays and historical material. In view of this, play texts and critical comments by theatre critics were closely read and analyzed. Critical comments were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The former refers to interviews and impromptu discussions while the latter concerns literary materials like books, journals, newspapers, published and unpublished essays, conference papers, theses and dissertations.

Since this work is concerned with an exploration into the history of literary theatre from its beginnings to the recent post-Independence period, and, considering the need to understand the psychology, sociology and historical trends in Nigeria from her pre-colonial cultural development, an interdisciplinary approach was also employed in this study. Readings in theatre studies, history, sociology, and psychology were carried out. These readings helped to answer questions concerning the impacts of colonialism, political Independence, neocolonialism, civil war, military interregnum and the recent struggle for democracy of theatre and its reception. It also helped to clarify issues concerning the role of culture, social and psychoanalytic factors in the appreciation of plays.
This work also embarked on the examination of writings by foreign authors, critics and scholars for the purpose of comparison. Hence employed in the analysis of information, were writings on theatre and other related disciplines. For example, Eldred Jones, James Gibbs, Roland Barthes, Sussan Bennet, M.H Abrams, Oscar Brockett, Bernard F. Dukore, Jerry V. Pickering, Martin Essline, Stanley Glenn, Stephen Langley, Berth Lindfors, Andrew Milner, Patrice Pavis, Sam Smiley, Victor Turner, Edgar Wright, Charles Bressler and others are a few of the many critics whose works were useful. Available data collected through the above sources were carefully analyzed for reliable and authentic conclusions. Sources of data were acknowledged and documented, using the MLA parenthetical style.

At the end of this exercise the study has been able to determine which plays, generation of authors, ideological or theoretical inspirations, generated greatest or lowest reception, while reasons for each condition have been adduced, and the solutions suggested. The entire work is split into seven chapters: chapter one and two deal with the introductory sections and the literature review respectively. In the literature review, theatre reception theories or what may be called theorties of theatre criticism are surveyed. Chapter three examines some critical perceptions of literary theatre within the period 1948 to 2010. Chapter four looks at the reader and the art of reading as functional imperatives of literary theatre reception, while chapter five surveys the historical antecedents of poor reception in Nigeria. Chapter six explores the remedial measures for reducing negative reactions to Nigerian literary theatre in order to ensure better reception. Chapter seven is the summary and the conclusion of the study.
CHAPTER TWO

2.0 REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This review examines the current scholarship on literary theatre reception. In pursuance of this, the review exposes the literary theories that influence theatre critics in their appraisal of Nigerian written drama of English expression. The theories comprise the European (Western), the ‘post-colonial’ (Africanist) and the ‘hybrid’ (Western cum Africanist) approaches. Owing to the vast array, as well as the diversity of Western approaches, the European theories are grouped here as aesthetic and extra-aesthetic tools of criticism. The former embraces Aristotle and such other critics as Horace, Longinus, others whose precepts “are (quite rightly and legitimately) alive and well in the literary theories of the west, though now jostled and sometimes ignored by a swarm of later arrivals” (Wright 4).

The second group of critics comprises what Abiola Irele describes as “such diverse territories as … Russian Formalism, Phenomenology, Structuralism and Semiotics, and more recently, “Deconstruction” (94). The extra-aesthetic theories comprise the biographical, the sociological, the historical, the moral and the psycho-analytic concepts. Under these extra-aesthetic tools, theories like Marxism and Feminism are also discussed as critical approaches to Nigerian literary drama.

The post-colonial (Africanist) approaches seek to contradict the resultant effects of colonialism. In the case of Nigerian written drama, they try to mediate the crisis of interpretation created by western criticism against play texts. These approaches include concepts of drama derived from traditional African performances such as rituals, folktales, myths, legends, dances, songs. Theories that are derivable from rituals include what may be described as:
• *Mmonwu* theory
• *Egugun* theory
• *Alekwu* theory

From these masquerade performances, derivable theories are:

• *Omabe* theory
• *Odo* theory
• *Ijele* theory
• *Gelede* theory
• *Alagba* theory
• *Kete* theory

The ‘hybrid’ approaches are conceptual combinations of western and African theories which can recognize the hybridity of Nigerian written drama. They include Wole Soyinka’s mythopoetic approach, Emeka Nwabueze’s masquerade dramatic theory, Sam Ukala’s theory of Folkism, Ola Rotimi’s para-linguistic and traditionalist approaches.

The objective of this theoretical exploration in a study of this nature is three-fold. The first is to appreciate the critical tools in use in appraising Nigerian play texts during the historical period 1948 to 2010. The Second aim is to identify the critical lacuna in the criteria of reception. Finally it cannot be ignored that in achieving these objectives, one reveals to Nigerian playwrights, the guiding laws for enhanced dramaturgy.

2.1 Western Dramatic Criticism: The Aesthetic Canons of Reception

What are the western dramatic theories utilized by critics between 1948 and 2010? Writing in 2000, a period which falls within the era being surveyed in
this study, Amechi Nicholas Akwanya observes: “perhaps the theory most widely used in the criticism of African literature is neo-Aristotelianism, emphasizing such criteria as realist mimesis, plot, theme, authorial intention, characterization and character types, the quality of action, argumentative structure, and style” – issues that also embrace “primitive statements about the nature of literature” (63). Primitive statements here imply classical concepts of drama derived from Aristotle, Horace, Longinus as well as subsequent conceptualizations of the theories through the renaissance period and possibly beyond.

Neo-Aristotelianism can also be conceptualized as the mixture of Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian approaches in the criticism, composition and production of modern literary drama, such as the Nigerian literary theatre. A.S.A Uyovbukerhi exemplifies the Aristotelian approaches as,

The noble hero or protagonist (usually a king or prince or a member of the aristocracy); an action whose incidents are arranged in a linear (cause-to-effect pattern) climatic plot; the arousal of pity and fear leading to catharsis, the tragic flaw in the hero, the hero’s defeat and his enlightenment … (223).

He also describes the non-Aristotelian features as “scenes that go on simultaneously and sometimes in multiple languages!” (223). When the above features are mixed together, as seen in the works of ‘Eurocentric’ critics of African literary drama, notably Ola Rotimi and J.P Clark, the neo-Aristotelian principles can be said to be in use. A.S.A Uyovbukerhi corroborates this view in his statement that “several African scholars including Oyin Ogunba, Abiola Irele,
Wole Soyinka and Chinweizu … have” referred to the neo-Aristotelian principles as “Eurocentric criteria for the criticism of African literature” (228).

These criteria include the “application of the Aristotelian principle of ‘mimesis’ to the African dramatic experience” (227); the view of African drama as functioning within the aesthetic framework of mimesis as defined by Aristotle (224). In addition to following the mimetic approach, Neo-Aristotelianism also encompasses the attribution of the elements of plot and its concomitants of suspense and conflicts to African drama. Based on the above, therefore, in this study, neo-Aristotelianism can also refer to drama, criticism or theory that is rooted in African tradition but employs in its synthesis or analysis, the aesthetic principles of Aristotle such as mimesis, plot, character, theme, language, music and spectacle, and this implies that even when these Aristotelian tenets are employed but not strictly adhered to in a work of art, such a material can still be considered as neo-Aristotelian.

The neo-Aristotelian mixture of Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian theories are eloquently testified to by Rotimi’s view of African drama which, according to him, functions within the aesthetic framework of mimesis as defined by Aristotle. In his paper – “The Drama in African Ritual Display”, Rotimi exhibits his neo-Aristotelian inclination. According to him,

The standard acceptation of the term drama, within a cultural setting, at any rate, implies ‘an imitation of an action … or of persons in action’, the ultimate object of which is to edify or to entertain. Sometimes to do both …. Ritual displays that reveal in their style of presentation in their purpose, and value, evidences of
imitation, enlightenment and or entertainment, can be said to be

drama. Thus, while the exciting series of ‘Abebe’ dance
processions that highlight the seven-day long Edi festival of Ile-Ife
cannot be called drama, the Mock-duel scene preceding the
festivities is drama (Ogunbiyi 77).

The neo-Aristotelian qualification of the ‘Mock-duel’ as drama evidently follows
its mimetic features. The reign of neo-Aristotelian theoretical practices in Nigeria
coincides with the period referred to by Abiola Irele when he states that in his
undergraduate days in the late 50 s, literature in Ibadan (including dramatic
literature) was studied

Within the fairly rigorous but comfortable doctrinal positions
defined by the practical criticism of the Cambridge scholars, I.A
Richards and F.R. Leavis, extended in its canons and procedures by
their north American counterparts of the so called school of ‘New
criticism’. In the real sense, this is, by and large the dominant
approach to the study of literature in Nigerian universities even
today (94).

This dominant approach, no doubt, remains the neo-Aristotelian modes which
derive from Aristotle’s basic principles of plot, characterization, theme, style
(language). These theories come together to constitute the aesthetic essence of
western drama, and also make up the literary imperative of Nigerian written
drama.

What can be learnt so far is that a literary play has aesthetic qualities of,

• Plot
The reader needs to study these elements closely in order to appreciate the play’s meaning. Following the opinions of Irele and Akwanya, this critical approach remained in vogue through 1950 to 1988 and perhaps extended to the year 2000. Many western oriented critics have continued to receive highly, play scripts that come close to or fulfill the aesthetic excellence of these theoretical elements in their crafting. Inversely, these critics receive with disapproval, play scripts that fall short of the above credit. Different terms and concepts have been employed by writers to refer to the aesthetic ideals required of each of the elements in playwriting, such as, ‘a well articulated plot’ - while referring to the cause and effect arrangement of incidents in a play script; ‘profundity’, ‘topicality’ and ‘clarity’ of subject matter – referring to a ‘sublime’, ‘significant’ and ‘clearly appreciated’ theme of a text. The aesthetic pitfalls that can attract poor reception under the criteria of the Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian principles include absence of plot or a progressive action, stylistic obscurity, and what Emeka Nwabueze describes as “Jagged diction and contorted imagery” (195), and such characters that do not develop, lack of character “propriety”, characters that lack true to life quality and “consistency” (Dukore 44).

In view of these, many of Soyinka’s plays may be dismissed as poorly crafted and aesthetically below standard, by a critic who does not understand his metaphysical and linguistic approaches to dramaturgy – as may be observed later in this study. In other words, because some of Soyinka’s plays like A Dance of the
Forests, The Strong Breed, defy the western reader’s search for plot, they can attract their critical condemnation. But an Africanist study of Soyinka’s use of traditional African performance techniques will reveal his deft craftsmanship and high critical esteem. Furthermore, there are numerous critical essays written by different critics, both European and Eurocentric African writers, who currently employ the above parameters of textual appraisal. Martin Esslin in his article: “Two Nigerian playwrights”, opines that “… in order to reach truly universal acceptance, a play must have a subject matter that is accessible to the maximum number of different societies; and it must be an example of supreme craftsmanship in construction and language” (256). Furthering on linguistic appraisal of Nigerian plays, Esslin writes:

Realistic plays in non standard idioms are untranslatable. Only highly stylized poetic drama has a chance in translation. And that surely is the reason why J.P. Clark writes entirely in a highly stylized free verse, while Wole Soyinka’s prose (which only occasionally is heightened to verse) also remains on a strictly formalized, stylized level. The question arises however: would it not have been more effective and easier for J.P. Clark to deal with his subject matter in realistic vernacular, prose terms? To me this certainly is true of his play The Raft … (257).

In furtherance of this negative observation, Esslin disapproves Soyinka’s approach in not keeping to the demand of character propriety in some of his plays – making minor and lower characters speak the same standard English as the higher and more important ones (256).
Writing on the topic: “Language as Effective Thematic Vehicle in Drama: Ola Rotimi’s *If ... a Tragedy of the Ruled*”, A.B.C. Duruaku explores the Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian qualities of the play when he opines that,

The characters are ordinary people from different tribes of Nigeria, seeking their own destinies. The play is largely written in ordinary spoken English language. The characters that use the English language can be grouped linguistically … (119).

This critique focuses on aspects of Western theories that border on style, character propriety or linguistic identity of character. Here, contrary to Aristotle’s dictates about the use of ‘strange’ and ‘unusual words’ (quoted in Dukore 49), Duruaku detects the neo-Aristotelian use of ordinary language in the play. Solomon Odiri Ejeke’s essay titled “Para-Linguistic Aesthetics in Ola Rotimi’s Theatre”, is another example of the western aesthetic approach to Nigerian play texts. Although he acknowledges Rotimi’s attention to Nigerian culture, Ejeke’s concern for the western aesthetic qualities of his theatre, such as clear theme and the presence of spectacle, is manifested in his view that the cultural indices in Ola Rotimi’s drama and theatre “are music, dance, songs, chants” … which help to establish the mood and create “the atmosphere of the plays”, in addition to reinforcing and communicating “the thematic concepts” and making the spectacle more sparkling, interesting and aesthetic (62).

The foregoing examples also illustrate the use of ‘formalism’ as an aesthetic theory that is applied to Nigerian written drama – within the period 1948 to 2010. K.M. Newton observes that formalism as a theory emphasizes on the text itself (4), while Chinyere Nwahunanya opines that “the formalist approach is
essentially aesthetic and assumes that the literary artifact is an ‘…aesthetic object, capable of arousing aesthetic experience’ (36). Both Newton and Nwahunanya agree that a text is a composite artifact that embodies aesthetic elements that can yield textual meaning to the reader without involving extra-aesthetic factors like sociological, moral, psychoanalytic, historical or biographical descriptions.

According to Merriam Webster’s Encyclopedia of literature, formalism refers to a

Marked attention to arrangement, style or artistic means (as in art or literature), usually with corresponding de-emphasis of content. The word is used to refer to the approach taken by literary critics who emphasize the formal aspects of a literary work, in particular the Russian school of literary criticism that flourished from 1914 to 1928 (427).

Further discussion of the tenets of formalism point at the ideas that,

The formalists sought to make their analyses more objective and scientific than those of symbolist criticism. Closely allied to Russian futurists and opposed to sociological criticism, the formalists analyzed the text itself, apart from its psychological, sociological, biographical and historical elements. Formalism was a powerful influence in the Soviet Union until 1929, when it was condemned for its lack of political perspective. Later, largely through the work of the structuralist linguist Roman Jakobson, it became highly influential in the west, notably in Anglo-American
New criticism, which is sometimes called formalism, and in structuralism (427).

The concept of formalism has also been explicated by Amaechi Nicholas Akwanya who opines that,

The key statement in this theory is that literature is a linguistic construct, having the distinctive quality of ‘literariness’ (Swingewood 1986). This notion is in turn defined in terms of the rhetorical devices, both the traditional ones like irony, imagery, symbol, and rhythm …. Formalist criticism therefore analyses the work as language, but as one that is defamiliarised… thereby constituting the work as a self-sufficient world…. The discourse of formalist criticism comprises the study of the functioning of the devices in individual texts … (61-62).

The preceding views on formalism imply that the theory considers the aesthetic qualities of a text and de-emphasizes the extra-textual factors. Hence, issues like plot, theme, characterization, style, and literary devices that enable the reader to pass judgment on the text, constitute the focus of formalism, rather than sociological, historical, moral, biographical and psychoanalytic factors. Some formalist theorists are I.A. Richards, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, Rene Wellek, W.K. Wimsatt. The leading theorists of the formalist school were Boris Eichenbaum, Victor Shklovsky, and Roman Jakobson.

The reader-response theories like structuralism, phenomenology, deconstruction, which were mentioned earlier are also employed as aesthetic
approaches that justify the textual readers’ authority to determine the value of a text.

The structuralists’ approach to the reading process is associated with theorists whose leading names include Jonathan Culler, Gerald Prince and Roland Barthes. Structuralists also include Claude Levy-Strauss, Valdimir Propp, Tzvetan Todorov, Gerard Genette, Ferdinand de Saussure, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roman Jakobson and others. According to Culler, a text embodies “literary conventions, codes and rules which, having been assimilated by competent readers, served to structure their reading experience and so make possible, at the same time as they impose constraints on the partially creative activity of interpretations” (257). In other words, Culler espouses that certain codes that are embedded in the text which are also identifiable in the larger society, enable the reader to interpret the meaning of the text.

Gerald Prince espouses the structuralist theory of narratology – “the process of analyzing a story, using all the elements involved in its telling, such as narrator, voice, style, verb tense, personal pronouns, audience, and so on” (Bressler 64). Roland Barthes in his book Image, music, text, demonstrates that the reader or the audience can distinguish various levels of meaning from what is read, such as the “informational level”, “the symbolic level” (56) and the obtuse level. Hence, he encourages a mode of reading that opens the text to an endless play of alternative meanings (Abrams 257).

Important contributions of structuralism to reader-response criticism are obvious in the writing of M.H Abrams where he posits that
Structuralism is in explicit opposition to mimetic criticism (the view that literature is primarily an imitation of reality), to expressive criticism (the view that literature primarily expresses the feelings or temperament or creative imagination of its author), and to any form of the view that literature is a mode of communication between author and readers. More generally, in its attempt to develop a science of literature and in many of its salient concepts, the radical forms of structuralism depart from the assumptions and ruling ideas of traditional humanistic criticism (348).

The major highlights of the above opinion are the notions that a literary text is a mode of writing that embodies internal elements that follow particular literary conventions and codes which do not refer to any reality that exists outside the work. Again, the author’s intention, his feelings and initiative are not the determinants of the interpretation given to a literary work, nor is a text equipped with a ready-made meaning, originating from the author. Rather, ‘as institution, the author is dead, and is replaced “with the reader as the central agency in criticism”; the reader “as a conscious, purposeful, and feeling individual, is replaced by the impersonal activity of ‘reading’, and what is read is not a work imbued with meanings”. Hence, according to Abrams,

The focus of structuralist criticism, accordingly is not on the sensibility of the reader, but on the impersonal process of reading which, by bringing into play, the requisite conventions, codes, and expectations, makes literary sense of the sequence of words, phrases, and sentences that constitute a text (348).
Phenomenology is one of the reader-response theories. Although as a philosophical critical perspective, phenomenology was established by Edmund Hussert (1859-1938), Roman Ingarden (1893-1970) adapted the theory for explaining the process of understanding and responding to literary work, and subsequently influenced German critics like Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss.

In Ingardens analysis, a literary work originates in the intentional acts of consciousness of its author – ‘intentional’ in the phenomenological sense that the acts are directed toward an object. These acts, as recorded in a text, make it possible for a reader to re-experience the work in his or her own consciousness. The recorded text contains many elements which are potential rather than fully realized, as well as many ‘places of indeterminacy’ in what it sets forth. An active ‘reading’ responds to the sequence of the printed words by a temporal process of consciousness which ‘fills out’ these potential and indeterminate aspects of the text, and in so doing, in Ingarden’s term, the reading concretizes the schematic literary work. Such a reading is said to be ‘co-creative’ with the conscious processes recorded by the author, and to result in an actualized aesthetic object within the readers consciousness which does not depict a reality that exists independently of the work but instead constitutes a ‘quasi-reality’-that is to say, its own fictional world (Abrams 261).

In consonance with Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser opines that a literary work-resulting from the author’s intentional act embodies some ‘gaps’ or
‘indeterminate elements’ which must require the reader to fill, and in doing so, arrive at a meaning in his ‘consciousness’. Thus, phenomenology proposes that the reader is involved in a transactional activity with the text in arriving at the textual meaning. Applying phenomenology to history of reader-responses, H.R. Jauss proposes the ‘Reception theory’ in which he opines that “readers from any given historical period devise for themselves the criteria whereby they will judge a text” (Bressler 65). These criteria, which comprise the historical period’s critical vocabulary, its world view and social environment, is referred to as ‘horizons of expectation’. The relationship between Jauss’ opinion and Ingaden’s phenomenological clarifications is that the reader applies his horizons of expectation in the co-creative process of ascribing meaning to a text or in filling the gaps created by the author of a text.

Other reader-response critics include Norman Holland and Stanley Fish. Holland views the reader as one that engages in a transactional endeavour with the text in order to arrive at a meaning. Writing on Stanley Fish, K.M. Newton cites the theorist as asserting that “texts are brought into being by the reader’s interpretive principles and strategies, though such strategies are not subjective in the narrow sense, but are derived from interpretive communities which share similar strategies of interpretation” (79).

Deconstruction is also a theory of reading, which was originated and named by a French theorist – Jacques Derrida. According to Sunday Anozie, “Deconstructionist theorists like Derrida and Paul Ricouer are conservative (and or dissent) structuralists”, since they are opposed to the more ideologically inclined structuralists like Michael Foucault (in Archaeology) and Julia Kristeva.
(in Semiology) (224). As the forerunner of Deconstructionist theory, Derrida maintains that reading is a deconstructive act because,

It is aimed not at what goes on in the head, the conscience or the subconscious of the writer, but at what goes on inside the text. Reading deconstructs … by revealing them (the textual elements) as a system of intra-textual dialogues or as a dialectical interplay of oppositional elements. By effective deconstruction of this, therefore, a text is disarmed of its meaning, neutralized, in short, read (224).

The claim of this opinion therefore is that deconstruction refers to textual reading that exposes the interplay of oppositional elements within a text, which disarms it of its meaning. In view of this explication, deconstruction also becomes a critical tool which was developed in the western literary practice for appreciating the aesthetic quality of a text. Example, a deconstructive reading of any literary work, proceeds through a critical study of the text, with a view to giving it different interpretations. The critic searches for contradicting signals or binary operations (opposing concepts) in the play, which appear in form of ‘misspeaking’ or paradoxical (contradictory) ideas and expressions. The critic also endeavours to eschew logocentric thinking, which refers to what Charles Bressler describes as the belief that there is an ultimate reality or center of truth that can serve as the basis for all our thoughts and actions” (273). Avoidance of ‘logocentrism’, therefore, enables the deconstructionist critic to broaden the mind in the exercise of reading, looking at the text from diverse philosophical
perspectives in order to reach different interpretations. Consequently, this denies the text of one central meaning and widens its interpretive base.

From the foregoing theoretical analysis it can be deduced that,

- The reader’s power in determining the meaning (quality) of a text is undisputed.
- The reader transacts with the text in the process of conceiving its meaning.
- The reader is co-creative and collaborative in making the literary work.
- The reader is largely influenced by his horizons of expectation (his social background, world view and life experiences) while developing a criterion or strategy for appreciating a text.
- The reader is indispensable in the making of a text, although the text, as an author’s “intentional act”, also influences the reader, by providing him with some structural contents that enable him to make his contributions by filling gaps in the text.

The ongoing discussion has so far shown that critical appraisal of Nigerian written drama which examines or comments on a play’s literary devices, style of composition, plot quality, significance and treatment of subject matter; depth, consistency and propriety of characterization, are all based on the western theories that differ from contextual considerations. Hence, they can be differentiated from the contextual and extra-aesthetic concerns like the sociological, historical, psychoanalytic, moral, and biographical essence of the text.

2.2 European Dramatic Criticism: The Contextual Approaches

Chinyere Nwahunanya maintains that sociological criticism
Begins with the axiom that literature (including the dramatic genre) is an expression of society, since it originates in society. It further assumes that social forces inevitably form and condition the writer, his work and his audience, and therefore what he creates has to be studied as a social phenomenon … Thus, three main issues are raised in the sociological approach: the sociology of the writer, the social context of the work itself and influence of literature on society (34).

In view of this enunciation, it becomes obvious that sociological readings of literature – dramatic genre specifically – involve the critical concern for the level of commitment of plays to societal problems, plays’ reflection of sociopolitical concerns, playwrights’ concern for sociocultural developments. Plays that reflect the themes of radicalism, Marxism, feminism, political leadership, nationalism, social conflict, are literary works to which sociological approach can be applied – using corresponding literary theories for appraising them. For instance Marxist oriented plays are critically received through the theories of Marxism; Feminist drama can be analyzed with the concepts of Feminism, theories associated with political ideologies and leadership praxis are tools for appraising political plays. Marxist critics assess a play’s effectiveness in demanding and articulating “social change and amelioration” (Gugelberger 1). Furthermore, they appraise the relevance of a play in advocating for a radical change to “society in which the masses will rise above their deplorable status” (Agbasiere 80). These critical expectations are based on the Marxist theory that in a society where the poor masses, who suffer to provide the labour for sustaining the economy, are
oppressed and denied the fruits of their labour by the few wealthy persons, a revolution should be set in motion to overthrow the oppressors and establish a socialist economy. Some critical essay topics that suggest the application of the Marxist theory to Nigerian play texts are:

- “The Nigerian Radical Theatre Movement and New Democracy” (Enna and Anyagu 81-93).
- “The Development of the Theatre of Radical Poetics in Nigeria” (Gbilekka 9-23);
- “Revolutionary Trends in Recent Nigerian Playwriting: Bakare, Ojo Rasaki’s Rogbodiyan and Alex Asigbo’s War of The Tin Gods as Paradigms” (Asigbo and Utoh-Ezeajugh).
- “Sowande’s Revolutionary Socio-Aesthetic Ideal” (Uji 44-66).

The following views expressed by critics illustrate the above sociological approaches:

The phenomenon of the radical theatre movement in Nigeria can be traced to two main factors: the after-effect of the Nigerian civil war, and some socioeconomic factors which affected almost all strata of the Nigerian society in the early 1970s …. It became a theatre of pedagogy, liberation and revolution underlined by Marxist aesthetics. Plays were not written to express certain ideological positions, or to condemn decadent sociopolitical and economic practices …. (Enna and Anyagu 81-82).
However, this theatre approach has been viewed with some level of disapproval, as expressed by Enna and Anyagu when they opine that “the radical movement has not been able to achieve wholesome success as would be expected…” (86).

Writing in his essay: “The Development of the Theatre of Radical Poetics in Nigeria”, S.E.T. Gbilekaa notes:

Since the civil war, a new sense of awareness seems to be flowing within the veins of the new generation of Nigeria playwrights comprising Osofisan, Sowande and Omotoso …. We shall soon see how the civil war together with some other sociological factors contributed to the growth of this radical consciousness which in the ultimate engendered radical drama (10).

Going further, he recalls the specific kind of plays that inclined towards this sociological concern, and sets them apart from the works of the older generation of writers. According to him,

What we identify as a new radical literary drama in Nigeria is traceable to plays of Osofisan, Sowande and Omotoso. Before 1970, Nigerian literary drama was predominantly conventional. The plays of Soyinka, Clark-Bekederemo, Rotimi and Wale Ogunyemi were preoccupied with the religious and social life of the people and people’s struggle for survival …. (15).

Having identified two generations of Nigerian dramatists who were sociologically oriented in their writing, he provides a comparative basis for critical judgment of their works; hence, he writes:
Generally, conventional Nigerian dramatists interpret history and society as being static. Even where history does move at all, nothing significantly changes. Other conventional dramatists regard history, and society as continuously undergoing a cyclic turn of fate. Consequently, man in such dramas becomes a mere pawn in the hands of the gods or fate .... A common fatalistic link binds them all. Thus, whether it is in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, *The Strong Breed*, or in *Song of a Goat*, the ominous mood of damnation and tragedy dominates .... The Nigerian radical dramatists reject the tragic vision of their predecessors (Soyinka, Clark-Bekederemo, Rotimi and Ogunyemi). Therefore, in their drama, this lonesome preoccupation with the redeeming protagonist is aborted. In its place, a belief in collectivism is adopted to help bring about a socialist society (17).

While highlighting the non-aesthetic weakness of the ‘conventional plays’, by pointing at the attitude of the radical dramatists, Gbilekka, as a critic also passes his own judgment thus:

While conventional plays are critical of the social, political and spiritual events surrounding their society, they neither point the way out nor do they suggest a particular social order that they want the society to adopt. They leave the choice to their audience (20).

Obviously, the above comments are derived from Gbilekka’s sociological and political critique on Nigerian literary drama of Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande and Kole Omotoso.
In their article, “Revolutionary Trends in Recent Nigerian playwriting: Bakare, Ojo Rasaki’s Rogbodiyan and Alex Asigbo’s War of the Tin Gods as Paradigms”, the following expressions portray critical responses to the sample plays:

*Rogbodiyan* is undoubtedly the story of Nigeria’s chequered leadership crisis under the military …. Although both the use of votes and mass-struggle are proffered as real alternatives for achieving political freedom, the playwright suggests none of these alternatives at the denouement of the play. By pitching Adegbani’s wit against the King’s and transferring the power to Adegbani through cant rather than violence, Bakare seems to project education as one of the potent weapons that can be utilized by the oppressed to wrestle power from despots (126).

In this comment, Alex Asigbo and Tracie-Utoh-Ezeajuh as sociological critics of Nigerian literary drama highlight the playwrights’ sociopolitical direction. However, these critics pass judgment over the play in their view that

Finally, one feels bound to commend Bakare’s recommendation of bloodless changes or overthrow of governments since, violence hardly solves any problem, but instead breeds more violence (126).

This critical approval of the playwright’s sociopolitical portrayal is also extended to the second sample play, as demonstrated here:

Whichever option we choose to adopt, Asigbo has been able to demonstrate in …*Tin Gods*, that the Nigerian nation must evolve a
modus operandi which will adequately incorporate, articulate and fulfill the yearnings of the people (130).

Questions raised on these texts by Marxist criticism are:

- How well does the play articulate the Marxist ideology?
- From what perspective does the play appreciate the ideology?
- What aesthetic approaches does the playwright employ in portraying the ideology?
- Are there some lacuna or shortcomings in the textual approach?
- “Does the act of confronting literary texts with their class positions result in the opening of new fields of knowledge and in the first place simply in the siting of new problem?” (Mulhern 35).

The Nigeria Marxist writers have not gone down well in the view of many critics who consider them as failures in their contextual and textual representations. The alien perspective of the Marxist writers in the articulation of African issues is also a source of indictment. Again, the Marxists are noted for their employment of Brechtian aesthetics in their dramaturgy. The articulation of class positions in literary texts succeeds in creating awareness for the masses against capitalist exploitation, or recommending revolutionary actions, but fails to chart a practical course towards a successful revolution.

In the same strength, feminist critics interrogate literary perspectives of “feminine issues” using the theory of feminism to judge play text. The central idea of feminist theory is the belief that women in the society are marginalized by the men in the scale of social interaction and responsibility, hence, leading to the suppression of the rights of women to fully participate in national development.
This ideology is set in motion in appraising the image of women in the society as portrayed in dramatic texts. Critical essay topics that employ the tools of feminism are exemplified by the following:

- “Feminist Theatre as an Agent of Sustainable Development: Tess Onwueme’s *The Reign of Wazobia and Go Tell it to Women Investigated*” (Tobrise 263-274).
- “Feminine Preoccupations in African Literature: A Theoretical Appraisal” (Kolawole 115).

As Mary E. Modukpe Kolawole opines, most of the feminist writers “identify with the need to inscribe feminine themes and concerns and solicit a new level of empowerment by focusing on themes that address women’s alienation, solitude marginalization, liminality, unjust treatment, conflicts with the family and society” (126). Feminist criticism can be exemplified by the remarks made by Mary E. Modupe Kolawole in her article, “feminine preoccupations in African literature: A Theoretical Appraisal. According to her,

Female writers shifted from moralistic stance to the creation of women whose level of awareness creates unease in their social relationship. There is usually a fundamental cleavage between their self perception and social values. This sometimes leads to rebellion and rejection of certain values. But since the society is not ripe enough for the radical posture, such dreams are aborted or stillborn (121).
Hence, seeing the futility in the sociological demands of some of the Nigerian feminist plays, he strikes on the lacuna in the works by requesting that,

Writers need to dwell less on tragic heroism, motherhood literature, marital problems and address other equally important problems such as the women’s relocation within a changing socio-political milieu and the condition of the everywoman (124).

Socio-political commitments of written plays abound in Nigerian literary drama which critics employ sociological critical methods to investigate. Through essays like “The Artiste and the Challenges of Nation Building” (Sotimirin 161-174); “African Literature and Social Commitment” (Agbasiere 71); The Theatre and Nigeria’s New Democratic Environment: A Sociological Overview (Akinwale 35-42). Nigerian critics receive relevant play texts and assess the playwrights’ craftsmanship in analyzing society and articulating its political problems and solutions in their plays.

In view of biographical criticism one recalls the theoretical position that “the most obvious cause of a work is its creator, the author, and hence explains a work in terms of the personality and life of the writer” (Nwahunanya 35). Critical inquires which interrogate the influence of an author’s personal disposition, his life style, family background and exposure, on his play can be categorized as biographical criticism. Eldred jones undertakes a biographical criticism of Soyinka’s A Dance of the Forests when he notes that,

For Soyinka, the gods were and still are often guilty of their callousness or caprice in their dealings with men, so that one is forced to bring them too to judgment. Both men and gods are under
arragement in *A Dance of the Forests*. Of both men and gods, Soyinka is apt to raise the most embarrassing questions. This is where his greatest value lies – and his greatest personal danger, he is an irritant to complacency and a wet blanket to romance (114).

But when a critic explores the impact of historical factors on the quality of a text, that is, when he questions the historical antecedents, that are evident in a work, the critic has undertaken a historical approach to his writing. When this happens, the theory under-girding the historical approach includes the concept of history as a source of drama. Femi Shaka exemplifies this in his essay. “History and the Historical Play: A Radical Study of Ola Rotimi’s *Kurunmi, Ovonramwen Nogbaiσi and Hopes of the Living Dead*” (181-198). Shaka notes that his essay seeks to “attempt a categorization of the plays with respect to the aesthetic and historical factor that informed their writing” (181), but he does not end at this. His vital critical comment below on *Kurunmi* in his essay, reveals the essence of historical and aesthetic criticism in articulating the strength and weakness of a play. For example, he maintains.

On the formal level, Rotimi achieved a high level of success in his blending of such traditional performance elements like chants, incantations, parables, proverbs, raw native witticisms etc… however, Rotimi’s portrayal of *Kurunmi* as a monogamist, being married to only Mosadiwin, is a misnomer. An African leader of the rank of Kurunmi is most likely to have a harem, not a single wife as Rotimi has characterized Kurunmi (188).
Again, remarks on J.P. Clarks choice of the Greek model in crafting his play, *Song of a Goat* – is a good example of historical approach – employing the theory that plays written in the past can be reproduced in writing by later dramatists in a different setting. Abiodun Adetugbo in his article “Form and Style”, while commenting on Clark’s earlier plays, notes that the plays *Song of a Goat, The Masquerade* and *The Raft*, were modeled on Greek tragedy, leading to his adoption of the defects of the model, such as characters that “do not come to life”; the abandonment of stylized free verse for dialogue conventions in the medium of English, hence, making the characters “speak out of character” (189-190).

Historical methodology is also demonstrated in Ahmed Yerima’s citation of a comment by Osayande Uguiagbe who, in acclamation of Yerima’s *The Trial of Oba Ovonramwen*, critically denounces Ola Rotimi’s *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. In the words of Uguiagbe,

…. Yes, when you read Ola Rotimi’s *Oba Ovonramwen*, it does not represent what really happened. It was not written from the true perspective of the Binis or what really happened at the time. He did not place the monarch at the pedestal. It was written to suit the Britsh people that came into Benin without any good intension (qtd in Yerima 73).

Three other extra-aesthetic theoretical approaches that demand illustration here are, the moral or ethical, psychoanalytic, and post-colonial criticism. “In moral criticism, the critic brings the cultural and religious assumptions of his or her own time to bear upon a literary work, judging the text according to how well
it fits the critic’s own ethical value system” (Nwahunanya 39). This opinion suggests a close relationship between ethics and morality. According to Joseph Omoregbe,

Ethics is concerned with the question of right and wrong in human behaviour. It deals with how men ought to behave, and why it is wrong to behave in certain ways and right to behave in certain other ways. In other words, ethics studies the reasons why certain kinds of actions are morally wrong and why other kinds of action are morally right and commendable. Good and bad (or right and wrong) actions are known in classical moral philosophy as “virtues and vices” (1993:IX).

Omoregbe further avers that “ethics presupposes that we already have a sense of morality, and it is the systematic study of fundamental principles underlying our morality … (1993:5). Following this concept of morality and ethics, it becomes valid to state that when Femi Okiremueta Shaka discusses the topic “Ethics and Professionalism in the Mass Media: An Essay in Media Ethics”, he is embarking on a moral or ethical criticism of media praxis. In this discussion, therefore, issues are raised as to whether it is right or wrong to publish certain information, whether it is honourable or dishonourable for a journalist to conduct himself in a certain manner; does an article in a newspaper satisfy the moral demands of media and the society?

Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to Blame* offers a wide space for moral or ethical criticism. Some of the moral questions to be raised about the play, are: is it ethical to approve the killing of the child born to king Adetusa and Queen Ojuola?
Is Gbonka morally justified to spare the life of the child? What ethical right has Odewale to kill his father and marry his own mother? And, are the gods not really to blame for the misfortune of King Odewale and Ojuola? In consonance with Nwahunanya’s view about moral criticism, above, different critical responses can be attracted by the foregoing questions due to the varying ethical value systems of critics. For example, if a critic believes that human beings are mere puns in the hands of gods who continually determine their fortune, then he is likely to declare the gods blameless.

Esiaba Irobi’s play, *Nwokedi*, Emeka Nwabueze’s *Guardian of the Cosmos*, Zulu Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods* are literary products that can spark deep moral inquiry. Concerning *Nwokedi*, the rationale behind Nwokedi’s death by the hands of his own son is questionable. Again, the maximum savagery and violence in the play can also raise the moral disapproval of critics because what the play portrays may be interpreted as a negative recommendation for the modern society – and this is highly outrageous! A moral approach to Emeka Nwabueze’s *Guardian of the Cosmos*, may also question the ethical justification in allowing corrupt and wicked forces to triumph over the morally just. In view of Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods*, a moral critic may condemn Ogwoma for breaking a funeral taboo by engaging in love affair with Uloko while still in mourning period.

Concerning psychoanalytic criticism, according to M.H. Abrams, since the 1920s, a widespread form of psychological literary criticism has come to be psychoanalytic criticism whose premises and procedures were established by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) …. Freud proposes that literature (including the literary drama in Nigeria) and the other arts, like dreams and neurotic symptoms,
consist of the imagined, or fantasied, fulfillment of wishes that are either denied by reality or are prohibited by the social standards of morality and propriety (290). This proposal implies that a literary work represents an imagined recollection of its authors wishes or desires that were stored in his subconscious. Hence, “the chief enterprise of the psychoanalytic critic, in a way that parallels the enterprise of the psychoanalyst as a therapist, is to decipher the true content, and thereby to explain the emotional effects on the reader, of a literary work by translating its manifest elements into the latent, unconscious determinants that constitute their real but suppressed meanings (Abrams: 291)

In consonance with M.H. Abrams, Charles Bressler also avers that,

Like the dream analyst, the psychoanalytic critic believes that any author’s story is a dream that on the surface reveals only the manifest content of the true tale. Hidden and censored throughout the story on various levels lies the latent content of the story, its real meaning or interpretation. More frequently than not, this latent content directly relates to some elements and memory of the Oedipal phase (prior to adulthood) of our development…. The psychoanalytic critic believes the actual, uncensored wish can be brought to the surface, thereby revealing the story’s true meaning (133).

The preceding explications point at a number of assumptions:

- First, a literary work is a product of the subconscious memories and wishes of the author which manifest like a dream or fantasy in the writing. Hence, a psychoanalytic critic tries to judge the text in relation to the author’s life
history, which reveals his experiences that determine the meaning of the text.

- Second, the critic’s subconscious memories, his exposure and environment which produce experience stored in his psyche, influence his interpretation of a text.

- Third, a literary work has a latent meaning, which a critic must decipher in order to achieve the real interpretation of the text.

Consequently, a psychoanalytic reading of a text may be approached in different ways. The behaviour and the psychological portrayal of characters in the text can provide insight into some hidden thoughts of the author and enable the reader to give meaning to the writing. Again, the reader’s subconscious, supplies him with stored signals that invariably influence his views and the meanings he attaches to the events and personages in the text. The reader, therefore, is at advantage if he understands the life history of the author, as well as the sociological environment of the text.

Furthermore, a psychoanalytic reading demands that a text be studied for its surface or literal meaning, and for its deeper or psychological interpretation. For example, a psychoanalytic reading of Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel* can proceed by raising the following questions:

- Who are the major characters of the play?
- What are their psychological dispositions?
- What aspects of Soyinka’s upbringing and life experiences must have supplied the themes, language, plot and characterization in the play?
- What are the literal and hidden (implied) meanings of the play?
The major characters of this play are Baroka – The Lion of Ilujinle; Sidi – the village belle; Lakunle – the school teacher, and a few others. Baroka is an epitome of tradition, Lakunle is an emerging, European elitist model. Sidi is an innocent, village beauty, hedged in between the lustful admiration of Baroka and Lakunle.

The play is a story of how a traditionally oriented Baroka emerged victorious in a contest, for Sidi, between him and Lakunle. On the surface, the story portrays the conflict between Baroka and Lakunle. Lakunle loses in the contest because his western ideas are incongruous with the tradition of Ilujinle; Sidi insists on his observation of the custom of paying her bride price if he must win her. While resisting the idea of bride price, Lakunle insists on western practices that are objectionable to Sidi in particular, and tradition generally. He also draws attention to Sidi’s appearance, which he sees as uncivilized but which is not against the tradition of the land. Example:

Lakunle: No. I have told you not to carry loads on your head.
But you are as stubborn as an illiterate goat. It is bad for the spine.
And it shortens your neck, so that very soon you will have no neck at all. Do you wish to look squashed like my pupils’ drawings?
(Soyinka 4)

Because it is the custom in Ilujinle, Sidi fails to understand fully, what Lakunle is pointing at, hence, she responds,

Sidi: Why should that worry me? ..... [huffily, exposing the neck to advantage]. Well, it is my neck .... (4).

Again, Lakunle reacts to Sidi’s dressing as follows:
Lakunle: [looks, and gets suddenly agitated]. And look at that!
Look, look at that [makes a general sweep in the direction of her breasts]. Who was it talked of shame just now? How often must I tell you, Sidi, that a grown-up girl must cover up her … her … shoulders? I can see quite … quite a good portion of – that! And so I imagine can every man in the village. Idlers. All of them, good-for-nothing, shameless men casting their lustful eyes where they have no business …. (4).

Baroka wins in the battle because Sidi listens more to the voice of tradition, and sees more honour in observing the custom of the land. Although she is tactfully lured into the net of Baroka, if she does not have more respect for tradition, she couldn’t have yielded to tricks. This simple story is a metaphor for the conflict of culture that reared its head during the reign of colonialism in Nigeria, and projects the idea that although Western Civilization was desirable, certain positive features of tradition must be respected if the colonial psyche would not predominate in the land and sweep off indigenous culture.

Psychologically, Soyinka exposes the school teacher, whose psyche has been colonized to the extent that his good sense of tradition has been lost, and he remains the loser for it. Baroka is a schemer, and knows how to get at his heart’s desire – irrespective of how difficult the means may be. He believes in the axiom: ‘the end justifies the means’. Hence this evidence of psychological maturity gives him victory over his rival – the school teacher – who is a representation of psychological enslavement of some African elites to modernism or colonial forces.
On the part of the playwright, some psychoanalytic conclusions are possible. Having been born and bred in the Yoruba entity that holds traditional personages in high esteem, one cannot doubt the subconscious forces that make him give victory to the ‘lion of Ilujinle’. But being, from the early stage of his life, a powerful philosopher, he never allows his European psychology to override the acquired respect he has for tradition. Hence, by exposing Lakunle to ridicule, he is advocating in *The Lion and the Jewel* that African’s should not allow their colonial psychology to blind them to the intellectual and philosophical riches of African tradition, and he is also revealing his psychic gravity which resists and urges other elites of his class to resist enslavement to colonial psychology.

The critical reception of plays from countries that were formerly under colonialism is referred to as ‘post-colonial’ literary reception. This reception which connotes post-colonial criticism, also includes critical works from colonizing countries concerning plays written about colonies or their peoples. In the words of S.C. Igwe,

Post-colonial criticism (or post-colonial reception) refers to the analysis of literary works written by writers from countries and cultures that at one time were controlled by colonial powers - such as Nigerian writers during or after British rule. Post-colonial criticism also refers to the analysis of literary works by writers from the colonizing country. Many of these kinds of analyses point out how writers from colonial powers sometimes misrepresent the cultures of colonized territories by reflecting more on their own values as superior, etc. Post-colonial literary critics re-examine this
Nwahunanya throws more light on the concept of post-colonial reception (criticism) and captures different stages of development in its meaning, when he writes:

Post-colonial criticism (also referred to as colonial discourse theory) originally meant the study of writings against the empire by the colonized natives of the former British colonies. Its meaning has now been extended to include all criticism about literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It also deals with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their peoples as its subject matter (e.g. the works of Joyce Carry on Nigeria, or E.M. Forster on India). As with other ‘political’ approaches, post-colonial theorists and critics also employ deconstruction and psychoanalysis to render their outrage against the dominant white (colonizer) establishment (40).

The three levels of discourse that shape post-colonial reception can be distinguished from each other, despite their common interest in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In the first level, critical writings against the empire functioned as reaction against deliberate colonial misrepresentations of Nigerian literary works or served as deconstructionist response to misguided and incompetent British reception of Nigerian literary drama. The writings against the empire also functioned as condemnation of unnecessary prejudice demonstrated...
against Nigerian works by British critics and their concerted effort to give approval to colonial hegemony.

However, the most impacting of the three levels are the writings from former colonies like Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and many other African ex-colonies. Here, the resolve of critics to articulate and celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from colonizers becomes obvious. At this level, critics try to assert the significance of literary drama that richly reflects the sociological, historical and artistic wealth of Africa, which are either by omission or commission underplayed by the colonial critics.

The third level of post-colonial reception which functions as criticism from colonizers, is either biased or objective. Critical works like Eldred Jones’, edited ‘Perspectives on African Literature’ contain valuable, objective comments on Nigerian written drama. Other writers in this mould are James Gibbs, Gerald Moore and Benth Lindfors.

In his explication of the concept of post-colonial literature (including literary criticism), Izuu Nwankwo E. writes:

Post-colonial texts reappraise the thinking and mindset of colonialism through a challenge of dominant cultural codes (2007:2). Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffiths concur to the aforementioned definition of post-colonial art forms and literature by averring that post-colonial art forms are products of a ‘culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day’ (2002:2). Consequently post-colonial texts invariably seek to re-align the psyche of the colonized society in
such a way that pre-existing mentality of the superiority of colonial aesthetics and values is replaced with a passion for indigenous aesthetics which could get to the point of obnoxious nativism (61).

From the preceding points of view, it becomes obvious that post-colonial literary reception also represents the strong passion of the once colonized peoples of Africa to assert the full validity of their literature that is capable of competing with those of the imperialists, rather than yielding to a subordinate position. Since critics of African written drama and literature resolutely help to underscore the validity of indigenous African performance theories with which Nigerian written drama can be assessed objectively in combination with the western theories, the post-colonial theatre reception can also be referred to as the Africanist theoretical approaches. Notable Africanist and Western writers who are recognized as post-colonial literary critics are “Edward Said, Bill Ashcroft, Ngugi wa Thiong’O, Homi, K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Leela Gandhi, Gareth Griffiths, Abiola Irele, Gayatri Spivak, Helen Tifin, Khal Torabully, Robert Young, etc (Igwe 100).

While discussing the Nigerian video films as post-colonial text, Izuu Nwankwo expresses his opinion that succinctly defines the dynamics of post-colonial criticism. According to him,

The video film … do not necessarily have to conform to the rigid form of Hollywood cinema or its content. It has to reflect the realities of the society that gave it birth in both matter and manner. However, one is not saying that the industry has reached perfection, but the argument is that the art form is valid, worthy of being evaluated on its own merits and relevant to the society in which it
exists. It is a cheaper way of making film and as such, an art form that poorer economies have evolved to have their say within the postmodernist global village in which humanity exists today. It is worse when one does not have a voice in any industry because the superiority of western media and its huge capital would definitely ensure the obliteration of its indigenous values from the psyche of the people. This is part of what neo-colonialism entails (64).

What is said above about Nigerian video film is also valid for Nigerian literary theatre, especially in its implied injunction that writers should eschew and exonerate themselves from the forces of neocolonialism, including the belief in the literary superiority of the west.

Post-colonial tendencies abound in the writing of scholars who try to justify indigenous African orature as vibrant theatre or drama. Examples are Ossie Enekwe’s writings like “Myth, Ritual and Drama in Igboland”, *Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Thearte*, “Theatre in Nigeria: The Modern Vs the Traditional”, Nnabuenyi Ugonna’s writings on ‘Mmonwu’: *A Dramatic Tradition of the Igbo*. Ruth Finnegan’s *Oral Literature in Africa* is also a post-colonial paradigm because it tries to analyze, from a euro-centric stand-point, the performances of Africa. David Kerr’s work on *African Popular theatre: from Precolonial Times to the Present Day* is also a post-colonial text because it portrays the African precolonial performances, and tries to resolve many polemic controversies concerning what is to be validated as drama or theatre among the indigenous African performances. Other post-colonial writers of note are Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele in their *Theatre in Africa*, Oyekan Owomoyela in his
Visions and Revisions: Essays on African Literatures and Criticism, Scott Kennedy in his work titled In Search of African Theatre, and others.

From the above survey of western approaches to the reading or reception of Nigerian written drama, certain major deductions have been made. First there is a top necessity for African rooted concepts of drama to be employed side by side with the western theories in order to mediate the crisis of appreciation caused by the western scholars’ lack of understanding of the cultural and cosmological contexts of Nigerian plays. The aesthetic elements of western criticism which exerted dominant influence between the 1950s and the 1960s, became jostled by extraneous critical tenets dating from the 1970s till date; therefore it is disputable to assert that the aesthetic approaches of the Cambridge scholars and the New School of criticism are still most dominant. It is more valid to infer that both the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic tools are struggling for supremacy. Nevertheless, the neo-Aristotelian aestheticism tends to be an unceasing influence at the fundamental level of on-going western criticisms because, whether it is Marxism or feminism; historical, biographical, ethical or archetypal criticism, attention must be given to the aesthetic configurations of the composition.

2.3 Post-Colonial Literary Theatre Reception: The Africanist

Theoretical Approaches

At this point therefore, it becomes imperative to examine the African oriented tools for appraising Nigerian written drama. Many Nigerian scholars have been at the fore-front in theorizing about Nigerian written drama. Like Aristotle in Classical Greece, who theorized on the basis of his study of actual tragic texts and their relationships with ritual beginnings, the scholars derive their
theoretical perceptions from modern Nigerian plays and the indigenous Nigerian forms of theatre. The scripts embody theories in latent forms, waiting to be catalogued by readers, without whom the texts cease to exist. Inversely, the theories, once identified can be employed as standards in the discussion of texts. But the theories are also subject to changes in time and space if the quality of written drama is to be enhanced.

Close readings of Nigerian play texts, as well as critical essays on Nigerian dramatic ‘orature’ and literature will vindicate the statements in this work about African oriented dramatic theories. The plays in question include: *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Strong Breed*, by Wole Soyinka; *The Gods are Not to Blame* and *Kurunmi*, by Ola Rotimi; *Ozidi* by J.P. Clark; *Wedlock of the Gods* by Zulu Sofola; *Atahiru* by Ahmed Yerima; *Morountodun* by Femi Osofisan; *A Parliament of Vultures* by Emeka Nwabueze; *Akpakaland* by Sam Ukala; and *Nwokedi* by Esiaba Irobi. These plays are rich in their exploration of indigenous Nigerian myths, rituals, folktales, history, metaphysics. These elements of Nigerian written drama, agree with features of oral dramatic performances, combining with them to provide theoretical concepts for judging Nigerian play texts.

Myth creation is at the base of Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*, while ritual is the dominant motivating force in the play’s progression. The ritual impulse of the play which does not yield to strict syllogistic movement of action tends to portray it as episodic and bereft of plot. Concerning its mythic impulse, the play’s characters, its theme and language are both mythic and ritualistic. Its setting is also mythic. The play has a mythical forest as a setting, its characters
like the legendary Demoke, Forest Father, Aroni are all evidences of the mythical attributes. The same can be said of the supernatural beings like Ogun and Eshuoro who are forest dwellers.

African ritual display employs appropriate diction that sets it off from ordinary. Diviners and chief priests while performing their functions employ poetic diction that is sometimes esoteric. Agboreko – the elder of sealed lips, a diviner - speaks as follows:

Agboreko: the eye that looks downwards will certainly see the nose. The hand that dips to the bottom of the pot will eat the biggest snail. The sky grows no grass but if the earth called her barren, it will drink no more milk … (38).

The description of the play’s theme as being mythic derives from its thematic connection with the legendary past of Nigeria. The play mirrors the country’s distant past and symbolically indicts some of her antecedents.

Wole Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed* is also an example of ritualistic play, portraying the rites performed in the ritual sacrifice of Eman as a carrier or scapegoat for the community. As an annual ritual, it is a responsibility which Eman should take over after his father, but he runs away from it only to be forced to do so in another setting. Eman’s decision to shy away is demonstrated in the following dialogue between him and his father;

OLD MAN: I meant to wait until after my journey to the river, but my mind is so burdened with my own grief and yours I could not delay it. You know I must have all my strength. But I sit here, feeling it all eaten slowly away by my unspoken grief. It helps
to say it out. It even helps to cry sometimes. (He signals to the attendant to leave them). Come nearer … we will never meet again son. Not on this side of the flesh. What I do not know is whether you will return to take my place.

EMAN: I will never come back

OLD MAN: Do you know what you are saying? Ours is a strong breed my son. It is only a strong breed that can take this boat to the river year after year and wax stronger on it. I have taken down each year’s evils for over twenty years. I hoped you would follow me (25).

The ritual and metaphysical tendencies of Zulu Sofola’s Wedlock of the Gods are also obvious. In the play, the “ritual of death and mourning” predominates. In the following dialogue, the ritual of mourning is alluded to:

ODIBEI: Adigwu died of a swollen stomach. A man who dies like a pregnant woman did not die a natural death. Somebody killed him.

OTUBO: True, but Ogwoma could not have killed her own husband.

ODIBEI: If she didn’t, why is she not here in those ashes? (6).

To be in those ashes, here, refers to the traditional ritual observed by a widow who must mourn her husband, by remaining in seclusion, and in ashes for a specific length of time. Apart from this, marriage ritual is also obvious in the giving away of Ogwoma to Adigwu, against her wish; and the expectation – when Adigwu dies – that she should be inherited by her husband’s brother. The breaking of this ritual
becomes a taboo, especially when the widow jumps the mourning period to contact a lover. This can be exemplified in the following lines:

OGWOMA: What have I done to them? I have fought for the past four years to marry a man I love, but these people will not let it be. I was tied and whipped along the road to Adigwu. Now that God has freed me they still say I am his brother’s wife.

ANWASIA: Listen, Ogwoma, a friend must always be honest and truthful. It is a common thing that when a man dies his brother takes his wife and makes her his wife. This is what our people do. Everyone knows that (21).

OGWOMA: Is the woman taken by force? Is she not to choose between her brother-in-law and someone else? (22).

In Emeka Nwabueze’s *A Parliament of Vultures*, traditional ritual is also involved. During the swearing-in of members of parliament, the traditional ritual of swearing is opted for as an alternative to the option of using the bible, which is described as a “western affair”:

HABAMERO: Good. Now, let us proceed to the issue of swearing-in the members of parliament.

PARKERS: Excuse me, Mr. Chairman. There’s a traditional method of swearing-in members of assemblies of this nature. The bible is the traditional instrument …

MADAM: Opposed! Don’t you know that people don’t respect the Bible any longer? Some people swear by the Bible and still tell lies in court.
BROWN: And furthermore, the Bible is a western affair. This is an African Parliament, and we have to do things the African way.

HABAMERO: Now, we have two alternatives: the Bible and the ancestors. And I believe the members want the ancestors. But since this is a democratic Parliament, I’ll put it to vote. Those who want the Bible say Aye.

PARKERS & OTOBO: Aye!

HABAMERO: Those who want the symbol of our ancestors, say Aye.

OTHERS: Aye!

HABAMERO: Our ancestors have carried the day. CHIEF OF PROTOCOL, please administer the swearing-in of members (37).

Following this voting in favour of the symbol of ancestors, a fetish named as Ogbunabani is set on the table for everyone to see. Subsequently, the ritual is completed by brandishing the fetish around the head of each Member of Parliament (38).

In Akpakaland by Sam Ukala, the playwright demonstrates his mythogenic deftness, and his effective use of folktale. The thrilling myth of how AKPAKA’s wife UNATA is bewitched by her co-wife-FULAMA-into growing a tail, meant for a cow, is a good example of this skill. This myth is characterized by traditional divination and occultic ritual executed by ENWE – the traditional doctor. These
rituals succeed in sending the tail back to FULAMA and exposing her as UNATA’s enemy who made her develop the tail in the first place.

The play – Akpakaland – also scores a high mark as a folktale drama. In the play, “the African folktale performance structure, which manifests in the laws of aesthetic response” (Ukala 263) is obvious. Due to lack of space, only the first law (as already described in the earlier part of this work) is illustrated here in the play. The spatial setting of the play is introduced in the beginning as: a living room in State House, A traditional Doctor’s home. There is an opening song which the narrator leads the audience in;

Lu n’ ilu                     Tell a tale
Ilu Nwokoro                 Tale about Nwokoro
Do n’ udo                   Tug at the rope
Udo kpiri-kpiri        Rope kpiri-kpiri (10).

The narrator and some members of the audience dance. Both song and dance help to warm the auditorium, and arouse the audience. The characters are also introduced in this ‘opening’ as,

Apaka in Agbada …. Two Guards …. There were his wives:

FULAMA, YEIYE, SEOTU, UNATA and IYEBI… (10).

Ola Rotimi’s The Gods are Not to Blame is an embodiment of Yoruba myth, ritual, folklore and metaphysics. The story of Odewale’s tragic career is a myth transposed from Sophocles Oedipus Rex, but bears the identity of a tale about a typical Yoruba hero who demonstrates the zeal to suffer in order to save his people from doom. As a myth, it portrays the activities of the supernatural:
Baba Fakunle a soothsayer, the gods who are the unseen elements that are consulted and propitiated, the Ifa Oracle, and the Ogun god of iron.

The play is not only mythical but also ritualistic. When Baba Fakunle is invited to divine on the faith of the new born baby in king Adetusa’s household at the beginning of the play, a traditional ritual is set in motion. Even when the boy is described by Baba Fakunle as follows:

Baba Fakunle: This boy, he will kill his own father and then marry his own mother!

Ritual demands that no other person should tie him up for killing than the priest of Ogun. This is demonstrated in the following lines:

NARRATOR: Priest of Ogun ties boy’s feet with a string of cowries meaning sacrifice to the gods who have sent boy down to this earth (3)

The play’s mythical hero, and plot, its ritualistic episodes, underscore its blending of traditional African materials with the western elements.

Ozidi by J.P. Clark is a good example of traditional African art of storytelling, ritual display and mythopoesis. It is the myth of Ozidi – a posthumous son who is brought up to avenge the murder of his father. Through rituals and witchcraft, Ozidi is nurtured and steeled to be able to carry out this responsibility. As in the rendering of such myths or folktales, the story teller begins his narrative by trying to arouse the audience:

STORY-TELLER: Attention please, all you who have come to see our show, will you please give me your ears? I am afraid their’s a hitch. Look, don’t let that turn your bowels sore … (1)
Usually, story telling as a traditional African performance is accompanied with song and dance. At the opening of *Ozidi*, while the story teller “is speaking, the orchestra and chorus of actors and dancers gradually emerge behind and swirl around him, singing the solemn, processional song *Beni yo yo, beni yo yo*” (2).

In scene five, a mythical character like the half human old man of the forest – Bouakarakarabiri – is seen in the ritual that is to invest *Ozidi* with charm and supernatural strength for avenging his father’s cold blooded murder. This act is carried out under the surveillance of Ozidi’s grandmother – Oraeme – who is a witch. A further reading of this play exposes other numerous actions and developments that border on mythology, ritual and folktale. Generally, the play creates a vivid imagery of the metaphysical disposition of a traditional Nigerian community – the Ijaw of the Niger Delta. However, J.P. Clark uses this traditional imagery, to mirror the kind of political intrigue that can afflict the larger society.

As Olu Obafemi would put it, the intellectual dramatists, whose works are examined above as examples, are “in many ways, the products of western education and their dramatic and aesthetic visions have, in fact been developed from a fusion of western dramatic models and the traditional African dramatic heritage” (67).

In numerous scholarly works portraying Nigerian masquerade performance as drama, the various theatrical elements that serve as source materials for Nigerian written drama abound. Some of these works are:

- *African Masked Theatre* by Drewal, J. Henry
• *The Dead Among the Living: Masquerades in Igbo Society* by A.O. Onyeneke

• *Igbo Masks* by Ossie Enekwe

• *I am Not Myself: The Art of African Masquerade* by Herbert N. Cole.

In these works, dramatic rituals, myths, folklore, metaphysics, songs, dances, language, spectacle associated with the masquerades are highlighted and playwrights exploit them in their play compositions.

From these dramatic masquerade elements of the written form, theoretical concepts are derived to help in fully conceptualizing the Nigerian literary drama. Thus, as stated earlier, African theories of the drama include concepts derivable from the masquerade, the rituals, myths, folktales, etc.

Due to the tendency of western critics to stand on the authority of European critical apparatus to undermine the value of Nigerian written plays – as pointed out earlier – there have been some extreme retaliatory and oppositional tendencies by a number of African scholars to advocate for a total rejection of “the whole apparatus of western criticism and western standards”. Joseph Okpaku writes:

> The present practice of judging African literature by western standards is not only invalid, it is also potentially dangerous to a development of African arts. It presupposes that there is one absolute artistic standard and that, of course, is the western standard. Consequently, good African literature is taken to be that which most approximates to western literature (qtd in Wright 4).

But given the conviction that a truly national dramatic literature exists in Nigeria today as implied below by Ohaegbu and Eustace Palmer, the above view of
Joseph Okpaku, corroborated by Obi Wali, is no more critically tenable. According to Aloysius U. Ohaegbu,

That African literature (African literary drama), however, exists is not in doubt; it is alive and expanding, continually dialoguing with itself and the entire world literature of which it is part, expressing African predicaments and world view within the context of the evolution of African societies as well as addressing the problems of human existence which Africans share with the rest of humanity. Like all other literatures which form part of world literature today, it has its own distinctiveness and authenticity (7).

In contradicting Okpaku’s suggestion above, Eustace Palmer, also maintains that if there is anything critics have been aware of, it is the autonomy of African literature, written plays inclusive, and their use of the so-called western criteria in its evaluation does not by any means prove that African literature is an offshoot of western literature (qtd in Ohaegbu 7). Hence it is not a misnomer to judge Nigerian drama by western standards, but it becomes untenable to do so without cognizance of the literary drama’s hibridity.

Okpaku would subscribe to a situation where an African play should not be judged by the standards of Aristotelian concept of plot, realistic delineation of character, “the metropolitan languages of the West” (Nwachukwu-Agbada 15), and European cultural artifacts like music and song. Prior to Okpaku’s contention, Obi Wali had argued that “the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium of educated African writing is misdirected and has no
chance of advancing African literature and culture” (qtd in Nwachukwu Agbada 15).

Wali and Okpaku would have preferred to see theoretical advocacy for vernacular usage in African writing; performance theories developed out of different forms of masquerade drama, such as the Omabe, “Agbogho Mmonwu”, “Ijjele” “Alekwu” and “Gelede” masquerades. From these examples, theories can be developed and employed, to the complete exclusion of western elements, in appraising Nigerian literary theatre. The extreme vision of these critics includes the employment of theories that propagate the application of “ethno indigenous theatre features and elements of language, ritual, folklore, folkish imagination, myth and mythopoesies, music, dance and gestural artifices” (Obafemi 7) in preference and total exclusion of western aesthetic approaches.

Obviously any critical reasoning that advocates this extreme decolonizing sensibility is, no doubt, overstretched and counter productive. Rather than dream for a total extinction of western apparatus, one may acknowledge what David Kerr describes as “syncretism” (72) in theoretical praxis, or what is referred to as hybridity in literary theatre reception whereby theories that can be employed in appraising a truly contemporary Nigerian written drama will emerge.

2.4 The Hybridity of African Literary Theatre Reception

The hybridity (or syncretism) of African Literary Theatre Reception refers to the critical temperament that advocates and really applies what Olu Obafemi calls “the diffusionist syncretic aesthetic platforms which mesh indigenous, oral performative modes, with Europeans dramatic canons and models to interrogate the Nigerian socioeconomic milieu” (7). Through this hybrid approach, criticism
of Nigerian texts can advance from its ethnocentric consciousness based on indigenous performance modes only, to the syncretic level exemplified by canons that are synthesized in performances like the Yoruba Opera of Hubert Ogunde fame, Wale Ogunyemi’s Lamgbodo, Sam Ukala’s Folkism, Wole Soyinka’s Metaphysicist and Mythic drama. In these literary paradigms, western literary canons blend comfortably with the African concepts.

Commenting on the potentials of indigenous performance elements in critical discourses of drama, Olu Obafemi opines,

First generation literary dramatists like Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark – Bekederemo have established the dramaturgical potential of ritual and folklore for sociopolitical discourse in many plays, including Kongi’s Harvest, The Road and Ozidi. In these plays, ritual and folklore were exploited, both as technical frameworks and as conveyers of social statements … (8).

If Soyinka, as a playwright (and as a critic and theorist) has a dream for Nigerian theatre that is similar to that of Yeats for Irish theatre – the determination to produce a literary drama, which has its roots in the Nigerian tradition (Jones 62), it is only appropriate that critical theories for an objective reception of this theatre, should employ both the traditional and the western cannons.

It is, therefore untenable to employ the western theories like the classical tenets of Aristotle, neo-Aristotelianism, formalilsm, Marxism, feminism, in the reception of Nigerian play texts, without considering the cultural, historical and sociological roots of the plays. In the same vein, it is “invalid” for purposes of intercultural communication, to employ exclusively, the concepts of traditional
African performance in the appraisal of modern plays. It is also important to note that there are three major levels of critical reception attitudes towards written drama in Nigeria. These are, the high, middle and low reception attitudes, which are attained through the equitable employment of both western, African and hybrid levels of critical methodology. Playwrights should understand and incorporate the relevant, adaptable and universal measures of both western and African dramatic ideals in their writing in order to take care of the Nigerian literary drama’s hybridity and for enhanced artistic quality.

Before concluding this chapter, it is necessary to state that care should be exercised in the application of western theories to the criticism of African dramatic literature so as to uncover other latent potentials of the African works. Some critics do not apply caution in this area, sometimes making uncritical remarks and inappropriate statements in their effort to create a linkage between African drama and its western counterpart. Emeka Nwabueze in “Ritual Drama of Appeasement – A Comparative Study of Soyinka and Noh” states as follows:

It will be erroneous, however to conclude that the structural and thematic affinities between Noh and Soyinka are the result of the influence of Noh on Soyinka. Having studied some Noh plays by the best Noh playwright, Zeami Motopiyo, and many Soyinka’s plays, one discovers that the two dramas have some similarities. These similarities are natural. There is no evidence that Soyinka has moulded his plays on the Japanese Noh. Rather, what one notices is the similarity between the Yoruba worldview and that of the Japanese (161).
J.P. Clark has also been subjected to this kind of criticism. Emeka Nwabueze has pointed out the incessant and unnecessary linkage of Clark to the western dramatic mode by some critics. In his article, “J.P Clark’s Song of a Goat: An Example of Nigerian Bourgeois Drama” published in *World Literature Written in English*, Nwabueze argues that:

Benham and Wake who ‘refer to Clark’s plays as being akin to Classical Greek drama because of the interwoven action of gods and man, and curses passing through one generation to another have not placed the play in its appropriate generic family, thus seeing it in a completely different, if not confused, manner’. He maintains that, ‘a careful reading of the play reveals that its profundity lies in the playwright’s employment of the characteristics of bourgeois drama’ (134).

### 2.5 Conclusion of Literature Review

It can therefore be concluded that literary theatre in Nigeria has its autonomous generic existence which is not dependent on, but interacts with western dramatic genres. Hence, critics should not employ only the western theories of drama in judging it. Both the theories derived from the traditional African and the western performance genres are indispensable in appreciating the Nigerian literary theatre. In the next section of this work, the influence of the above theories in the determination of readers’ attitudes towards drama texts is portrayed through a survey of diverse critical perceptions of literary theatre in Nigeria.
CHAPTER THREE

3.0 CRITICAL PERCEPTIONS OF LITERARY THEATRE WITHIN THE PERIOD 1948-2010.

Owing to the great diversity of playwrights and their play texts, this chapter focuses, among other issues, on the classical and European plays which were introduced into Nigeria through the literary practice of the University College, Ibadan in 1948, such as the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and Shakespeare. It also centres on Nigeria’s post-colonial plays with their authors like Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Tunde Fatunde, Kole Omotoso, and the more recent dramatists like Sam Ukala, Emeka Nwabueze and Tess Onwueme. The discussion is organized under four subheadings, namely:

- Radical Trends in Post Independence Playwriting in Nigeria: The plays of Nwabueze, Ukala, Onwueme and Irobi.

3.1 Literary Theatre in Nigeria during the Colonial Era (1948 to 1960): Critical Perspectives

In the criticism of Nigeria’s literary theatre there have been two major critical temperaments in relation to written drama during the colonial era. These
are ‘Africanist approval’ and ‘objective contradiction’. The former is represented by a notable critic and theatre expert – Dapo Adelugba – who in his paper, “The Development of Drama and Theatre in Nigeria”, championed the views that “The University College Ibadan has a history of vital amateur dramatic and theatrical activities from its earliest years” (60); that “The Bug – a famous early student newspaper in early 1950s carried fine contributions of drama sketches written by Ralph Opara, Pius Oleghe and Wole Soyinka” (61); that “The Classical Association, Hoi Phrontistai, had as early as 1952 an impressive production of Aristophanes’ *The Birds* …” (61). Indeed, this notable critic avered that there was a vibrant, impressive, fine, more formal, trail blazing, creativity-inspiring, and popularly-received-in-schools literary drama pre-independence. He concludes:

There was a vibrant theatrical atmosphere in Nigeria before 1960s, and if independence sowed seeds which in retrospect, seem vital, it must be firmly asserted that the ground which was to receive these seeds was already fertile. If the germination and flowering has been quick, we must seek the reasons for this not only in post independence developments but in the overall receptiveness and promise of the Nigerian environment pre-independence (63).

From the above perspective it may appear that a high critical approval (reception) had been accorded to pre-independence literary drama emanating from the activities of the University College, Ibadan.

An important question that arises against this background of assumed high reception is, if the pre-independence literary theatre in Ibadan was correctly assessed as one blameless event that was well received by the masses. Far from
that! Using the words of Chinweizu, Onwuncheke Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike in their writing – “Towards the Decolonization of Africa Literature: Issues and Tasks” (1980), “… we cannot afford an uncritical glorification of the past” (257). We may, like Adelugba brandish our pride in the achievements of early Nigerian indigenous playwrights like Henshaw, Opara, Oleghe whose works, no doubt were encouraging, but had no “enduring artistic qualities” (Ogunbiyi 27). One may idealize a past that was full of faults in a bid to prove ourselves as articulate as, if not more than, the colonial masters. One must not be blindfolded to the difficult communicative attributes of old classic and English plays that dominated the literary praxis of the pre-independence period such as exotic language, characterization, setting and plot. Themes could be universal, but the necessity for adaptation of the above elements for easy communication and higher reception was obvious. According to Fola Aboaba in an interview with Remi Adedokun on Saturday, October 27, 1990,

The plays we performed (in the 1950s) at the University of Ibadan were written by expatriates. There was no indigenous play. I mean no play written by an indigenous writer until later when people started producing Wole Soyinka’s plays … Basically, we started off by producing either Shakespeare or something from Bernard Shaw or something expatriate none of which portrayed familiar African elements to enhance its communication to Nigerian readers (299).

It may be contested that the above citation referred to stage production rather than the text, but we also know that textual analysis is an imperative process for a successful staging. If a text fell short of elements that yielded to the
reader’s ‘interpretive strategies’ and ‘horizons of expectation’ as enunciated by ‘reader-response criticism’ and ‘reception theory’, then such a play might not be produced successfully by such a reader. Moreover, without appropriate adaptation, such a play may be considered bizarre and irrelevant to the audience, even poorly received, as fewer readers, after watching the production, might be encouraged to read the text. Ahmed Yerima corroborates the above when he declares that the University College founded in 1948, “Started with students of classics and English literature (who presented) mostly old English classic plays and American plays which had no relevance to the university audience … plays through which the colonial masters fulfilled their nostalgia for home” (36).

These highlights underscore some important characteristics of early literary drama that testify to its poor reception. Old classics and American or English plays were appreciated by only a few educated colonial workers-elites – hence; the theatre was elitist and unpopular. At its nascent stage, the theatre lacked competent readers among the members of the University College Dramatic Society (UCIDS) students and there was paucity of well groomed critics to expose the plays adequately. One can therefore wonder how many Nigerians were literate enough to appreciate complex Shakespearean or Classical dramatic literature. The plays did not depict Nigerian environment, culture and social milieu.

Adelugba, in another essay, contradicts some of the optimistic issues raised above. Here, he points out that the American and European texts which were performed at the University College Ibadan in the 1950s were “stale, old English plays with poor dramatic content and without any bearing on the tastes of
Nigerian audiences (including readers) showing the students’ little idea of their needs or their audiences” (qtd in Yerima 120).

Ahmed Yerima also recounts that Geoffrey Axworthy who, according to Adedokun, “is credited with not only originating Educational Theatre in Nigeria but also in professionalizing the theatre in English language” (276), did not like the idea of doing English plays for an African audience, an example of which was Man from the Ministry. According to Yerima, Axworthy once remarked:

Another English play was also being performed by the Players of the Dawn. The group liked the English plays, but were not prepared to adapt such plays to the Nigerian experience. Most of the members of the group had been overseas, and had seen plays done at the west end local theatres in England and without second thought to the audience relevance of such plays had produced them for their pleasure² (119-120).

The foregoing views obviously point at the low perception of the unadapted forms of the alien texts. And this is further underlined by subsequent attitudes of playwrights like Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi and Dapo Adelugba, all of who expressed aversion for the consequences of classical and English plays, and had to embark on adaptations. When Soyinka states that he found the Bacchae, a Greek Classic written by Eurpides, fascinating, but saw the need to rewrite it for its better appeal to Nigerian readers (and theatre goers), since it was “very uneven and in many ways rather crude” (qtd in Yerima 120), he is suggesting that the old play was neither popular or appreciated nor relevant in Nigeria.
Ola Rotimi also identified the poor reception of Nigerian readers towards Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and its staging hindrances (including the earlier mentioned difficulty posed on the play director at the stage of textual reading and analysis), and went ahead to adapt the play to suit the Nigerian situation, giving it a new nomenclature – *The Gods are Not to Blame*. It is of great interest to note that the effort to fill the lacuna in reception which was glaring in the 1950s inspired several later adaptations of foreign plays in order to enhance their popularity and dramatic quality.

Hence, “Molière’s *Less Fourberies De Scapin* (The Trickeries of Scapin)” was adapted by Dapo Adelugba as *That Scoundrel Suberu* (Adelugba 38); Shakespeare’s *Othello* was adapted by Ahmed Yerima as *Otaelo* (Yerima 124). If transposition were a widespread practice during the decade under study, the attitude of readers and critics would have been more receptive. Gilbert and Tompkins, as cited by Etop Akwang also corroborate the irrelevance of European texts, and their consequent contradiction of favourable reception, when they state that “the colonial project”, as exemplified by the literary theatre, the European drama, in Nigeria and Africa generally.

Impacts on … the theatrical culture of (the) society … (and) operates in ways that sustain ideas, values, and even epistemologies which are foreign to receivers and therefore of limited relevance, except in maintaining the interest of imperialism (qtd in Akwang 47).

This view can be further interpreted to imply that European values in the plays and their tendency, in the 1950s, towards intimidation, promotion of racial
ideologies that helped to subjugate the cultural and psychological stability of the African, could not, by nature move many Nigerian readers to develop emotional attachment to literary theatre or even cultivate respect for it.

Demas Nwoko puts it succinctly: Western theatre is vulgar to the African’s aesthetic sensibility, hence they react to it with laughter. Not the laughter of an amused person but the chuckle of an adult at the ineffectiveness of a childish prank (477).

The theatre that alienates the people from their culture faces the threat of losing out in its business. Ejeke Odiri Solomon maintains that “culture is the soul of theatre business … the business of the theatre revolves around the culture of the people” (1). Joel Adedeji also agrees to this, when he opines that cultural traditions of many societies in the world have had bearing on the nature and form of the theatrical art (49). Hence, the value or appreciation of theatre depends on its bearing with the culture of the readers or consumers of its product. Colonial, literary theatre, which disregarded Nigerian culture, lost its ‘soul’ and remained a stranger and to a large extent poorly appreciated.

When one considers Derek Bowskills conceptualization of drama as “the imaginative communication of significant experience”, which “may make us laugh, cry, think (and) … sets out to make us respond and by practice to become more responsive in general” (111), one begins to wonder if the European theatre form fully served the purpose of drama to most Nigerians in the 1950s. The colonial theatre tried, with little or no success, to communicate the classics and old English experiences, but rather than attracting the necessary response from the few educated elites, it served as the genesis of a long lasting misunderstanding of
what theatre or drama stands for. J.A Adedeji illustrates this view when he opines that,

For the so called ‘educated’ African down the line, the word ‘theatre’ conjures up in his mind an association of ideas or concepts based on his schooling experiences some of which are: ‘acting and dancing’ (contortions and distortions of the physical body in obscene manner), drama (a comic or an ‘awada’ trifle, a laughable pastime) ‘English Literature’ (the study of Shakespeare, Sheridan and Shaw). ‘School drama’ (dressing up in funny plumes exaggerating the body for kicks …) (2)

This ugly contradiction of the essence of drama is a most vindicating sign that the literary theatre in the 1950s was largely poorly received.

From the preceding exploration, it becomes obvious that the literary theatre of the 1950s employed unfamiliar aesthetics and irrelevant cultural idioms, hence it served only a few people and was, therefore, elitist. It promoted the imperialist project in Nigeria and Africa in general. The theatre lacked experts among indigenous practitioners hence its scant reception was largely limited to amateurish theatre in secondary schools and tertiary institutions. Even the professional groups in town like the ‘Arts Theatre Production Group’, ‘The Players of Dawn’ were unwelcome tools of the colonial project. At any rate, a major critical approval given to the colonial theatre of the 1950s was based on its ability to provide literary texts for schools, and the University College, Ibadan and for adaptations and experimentations in the art of theatre production. It encouraged the learning of foreign language and prepared the ground for a fairly
enhanced reception that was to follow in the succeeding decades. The plays also provided materials for production groups “which sought to awaken interest in theatre and drama as entertainment and serious art” (Ogunbiyi 28). But the fact remains that this objective was not fully realized due to the serious shortfall of the colonial theatre.


This section of the review seeks to analyze the various critical perceptions of the post-colonial literary theatre in Nigeria, with the objective of identifying the reasons why the works of some playwrights are well received (critically approved and highly esteemed), while others are poorly appreciated. The playwrights in question, whose works are focused here include, in the main, Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark, Ola Rotimi and Zulu Sofola. Others like “Brownson Dede, Frank Aig-Imoukhuede, Sonny Oti and Mabel Segun” who “have written plays” are not under serious consideration here or even in critical focus because “apart from Mabel Segun who wrote for children, others have not taken up playwriting as a career” (Yerima 10).

Yemi Ogunbiyi, exploring the status of playwrights of this period, states:

It used to be the case to affirm that J.P. Clark and Wole Soyinka are Nigeria’s foremost and best known playwrights. That may have been correct only up until about 1975 or thereabout … certainly, Wole Soyinka remains Nigeria’s most versatile and enduring dramatist, standing above the others, not only in his prolificity but sometimes, in the depth of his perception. Clark’s stature seems to
have dwindled somewhat. For instance, as against Soyinka’s fourteen published plays (counting back from 1981) J.P Clark’s reputation as a major dramatist rests principally on his first four plays – *Song of a Goat, The Masquerade, The Raft, Ozidi* (33)

Ogunbiyi here suggests that Soyinka and Clark are perceived as similar in certain standards of critical assessment, but diverge in other respects. It is pertinent to explore the validity of these claims. Both Soyinka and Clark win acclaim as the foremost playwrights in Nigeria. Their plays are also assessed as pursuing similar philosophical ends. According to Olu Obafemi and Nassidi Yakubu “a young generation of Nigerian dramatists has been pre-occupied with the crisis of neo-colonialism, seeking for ways to reverse the condition …” but the older generation exemplified by “Soyinka and Clark avoid it to pursue issues of more universal significance” (qtd in Umukoro 12). This citation is further underlined by Obafemi in his assertion that

while their predecessors deal with universal verities and metaphysical profundities such as part psychic search for the meaning of life and death in Soyinka’s *The Road* (or the hopelessness of life in J.P Clark’s *The Raft*, the young playwrights deal with urgent contemporary social problems in Nigeria …” (qtd in Umukoro 119)

Saint E.T. Gbilekaa endorses this perception in his opinion that theatre in the mid 1960s “paid little (or no) attention to domestic issues”, but rather concentrated on universal African political “acts of misrule and corruption” as demonstrated by … “Soyinka’s *Kongi’s Harvest*, Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to
Blame and Kurunmi” (6). He further reasserts Obafemi’s opinion that “though projecting a humanist philosophy, the plays of Soyinka, J.P. Clark … were preoccupied with metaphysical psychic search for the meaning of life and death” (6)

Looking at the sociopolitical commitments of the foremost dramatists from the point of view of Obafemi, Nassidi, Gbilekaa and critics of their inclination, Soyinka and Clark are not highly esteemed as socially committed artists concerned with the needs of their generation. This assessment lacks full credibility as it borders on a lopsided interpretation of the lead Nigerian playwrights, hence, an underrating of their worth in the practice of theatre.

To put the argument in proper perspective, there is a critical divide between these critics of Obafemi and Nassidi bent, and those of S.O Umukoro’s inclination. The latter posits that “a critical encounter with the works of Soyinka and Clark reveals that they are devoted to solving Nigeria’s sociopolitical problems” (12). Umukoro’s view can hardly be disputed given the fundamental fact – as Aloysius Ohaegbu puts it – that the writer is by nature a sensitive questioner and a reformer; all literatures are in a way criticism of the society which it mirrors, of the human condition obtainable in the society (9). It becomes therefore tenable to argue that, contrary to the impression that Soyinka and Clark were only preoccupied with metaphysical and universal issues, their plays have sociopolitical undertones relating to Nigeria’s immediate problems.

Eldred Jones suggests this, by pointing out that Soyinka’s method in his plays like A Dance of the Forests (1960), The Road (1965) and The Strong Breed
(1964) is frequently to take an idea in traditional belief and extend it into a framework for something totally new and imaginative (56). According to Jones, By using this world of extended fantasy Soyinka liberates himself from a particular area of space and time and can look as it were at the whole universe and all mankind. This is the special liberating quality of the folk tradition (57)

This liberating force, this world of extended fantasy employed by Soyinka enables him to delve into wider horizons for the imagination of his readers, who can visualize the issues of the plays beyond the metaphysical realm to the immediate sociopolitical concerns of the nation. This perception strongly argues in favour of S.O. Umukoro who, in an interpretation of Soyinka’s plays, maintains that,

Ogun is Soyinka’s patron god. The deity dominates his creative mythology and is ubiquitous in his art. Ogun is a major character in such works as … Ogun Abibiman (1976) and The Road (1965), and the relevance of Ogun in the making of Demoke is implicit and fundamental. Demoke is Ogun incarnate, a kind of dramatic hero that may appropriately be called the ‘Ogun hero’. Other varieties of the Ogun hero in Soyinka’s drama are Eman in The Strong Breed (1964), Daodu in Kongi’s Harvest (1967) and Professor in The Road (1965). And the Ogun hero is the political leader that Soyinka envisions for Nigerian society because such a leader derives from the heroic qualities of Ogun which the incarnate possesses and demonstrates (68).
In the above metaphysical motif, one identifies a clear direction pointed out by Soyinka for emancipation from undesirable political leadership. In view of this illustration therefore, Wole Soyinka and J.P Clark need not be cut off from being credited as committed artists. Ayo Akinwale acknowledges that the first generation playwrights in Nigeria, such as Soyinka and Clark “wrote plays with a revolutionary vision”, despite their deep roots “in animist metaphysics” (17). Similarly, Alain Ricard in the book, *Theatre and Nationalism: Wole Soyinka and Le Roi Jones*, reiterates that “the problem of nation building was a central preoccupation of writers like J.P Clark, Wole Soyinka …” and a host of other later dramatists in Nigeria (156).

To further lend credence to the opinion that the philosophical depths of these playwrights should not be interpreted literally as only metaphysical, attention may be drawn to the aspect of reader-response theories where Roland Barthes in his book *Image, Music Text*, demonstrates that the reader can distinguish various “levels of meaning” from what is read, including the “information level”, “the symbolic level” (56) and the “obtuse level”. Hence he “encourages a mode of reading that opens that text to an endless play of alternative meanings” (Abrams 257). Play texts and their metaphysical elements can be bent towards sociopolitical and other meanings.

To stress the position of Barthes and Abrams above, J.P. Clark’s *The Raft* has been read as a portrayal of Nigerian nation in an aimless drift towards calamity and this could have been a powerful symbolic alert for both the leaders and the ruled to struggle against and avert the ugly fate. In Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed*, the writer is challenging Nigerians to rise up against forces that bond them
to perpetual servitude. Eman tries to initiate it, but because he is an individual and needs some collective, positive action to triumph, he cannot succeed. Hence, Soyinka is calling on Nigerians to begin a collective opposition to fatal enslavement that may be called neocolonialism.

Therefore, rather than receiving critical condemnation for being steeped in metaphysics, Soyinka and Clark should be highly appraised for promoting the indigenous Nigerian culture that was in dire need of ‘retrieval’ from “imperialist propaganda and misinterpretation” (Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike 256) and for employing the services of this cultural material deftly for creating modern African drama. Many critics, acknowledging this praiseworthy quality find it relevant to delve further into the metaphysical and cultural qualities of Soyinka and Clarks’ plays. Discussing Soyinka’s play – *A Dance of the Forests* – Obi Maduakor writes:

Soyinka wanted to create a truly modern African theatre by fusing the western conventions with ‘the idioms of the traditional theatre’. The result of this fusion is that elements of the African worldview naturally infiltrate into his imaginative vision. One factor that characterizes this worldview is animistic realism, that is, interfusion of matter and consciousness in past, present and future modes, which manifests itself in the cyclic approach to time and in the concept of reincarnation (177).

The above remarks made on account of this play can also apply to other early plays of Soyinka. According to Eldred Jones, in both *A Dance of the Forests and The Road*, Soyinka borrows from basic Yoruba beliefs to produce an
atmosphere in which at one and the same time we are in contact with the living and the dead, the unearthly and the earthly, with the present, the past and the future” (50). The same metaphysical impulse is evident in *The Strong Breed* by Wole Soyinka. When Old man speaks to his son EMAN in the following terms, the link between the past, present and future is obvious and portrays a cosmological inclination:

OLD MAN: Do you know what you are saying? Ours is a strong breed my son. It is only a strong breed that can take this boat to the river year after year and wax stronger on it. I have taken down each year’s evil for over twenty years. I hoped you would follow me (25).

OLD MAN’s remarks here represent an aspect of Yoruba culture that is embedded in the people’s world view - “the basic concept of the carrier or scapegoat” (Sofola 68). This is a tradition which provides that a person has to bear away the evils of the community every year in order to purify the land. In the play, such a person is chosen from EMAN’s family – where EMAN’s father – OLD MAN – has served his turn for over two decades, and EMAN should follow as the next carrier, but he is unwilling to do so. To avert it therefore, he takes refuge in another community where he is forced to take the responsibility.

As regards J.P Clark, Osita Okagbue highlights examples of metaphysical and universal elements in his works. To him, “*The Raft* … illustrates the hopelessness of human condition central to Clark’s tragic vision” (162). Okagbue exemplifies the Ijo people’s belief in predestination when he describes the younger Ozidi, a character bearing the title name of the play, as follows:
One who controls neither his destiny nor his actions in fulfilling that destiny. His destiny is chosen for him before he is even born; he simply follows the wind of his preordained life (163)

In *Song of a Goat*, “Clark presents characters who, in spite of their shortcomings, confront harsh laws of nature that pose difficult situations …. But none of them is able to master fate or triumph; they all come to grief” (Okagbue 161).

Of all the first generation plays as already mentioned in this work, those of Soyinka, more than others are exposed to varied critical disputations. J.N Amankulor observes:

The theatrical successes scored by Wole Soyinka’s drama have been opened to controversy. Some literary minded critics tend to see the more difficult of Soyinka’s plays as artistic failures because of their inability to convey meaning to the reader and by implication audience (75).

The above literary critics include some university lecturers who, Soyinka himself has observed as finding his plays “perplexing” (qtd in Amankulor 75). Ossie Enekwe also comments on Soyinka’s dramaturgy when he declares that the playwright’s writing is characterized by “rhapsodic flights usually festooned with abstract western ideas” which are as incongruous as the syntax he often draws from Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas (63). This opinion implies that Soyinka’s language is obscure and constitutes interpretive difficulty for Nigerian readers who are not yet fully at home with western ideas and culture. Uwa Hunwick notes that despite the ‘well tailored’, ‘imagery rich’ quality of Soyinka’s drama of the early sixties, the plays were “linguistically high browed” (63). This implies that
the language of his early plays demanded high intellectuality from readers for it to make sense. This quality can easily scare away the low and averagely intelligent readers, while even the high intellectuals are not completely free from the risk of misinterpreting the plays. Hunwick above suggests that Soyinka’s works are difficult; Biodun Jeyifo corroborates this opinion by maintaining that Soyinka is ‘difficult’, ‘obscure’ and ‘inaccessible’ when one considers his plays like *A Dance of the Forests, Madmen and Specialists* and perhaps *The Road* (413). These negative attributes translate to lack of reception from readers and theatre producers who must necessarily read, understand, analyze and interpret the plays for the stage. A practical example of this is found in Jeyifo’s declaration that:

> The now established ‘Classics’ of Nigeria literary drama, say Clark’s *The Raft* and *Ozidi* and Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests, The Road* and *Madmen and Specialists*, are the least performed plays of published Nigerian literary drama. Indeed both *Ozidi* and *The Road*, perhaps the two outstanding literary masterpieces, have never to date been performed by the non-amateur leading repertory companies in Nigeria (412).

Nevertheless, the obscurity and inaccessibility of Soyinka’s ‘Classics’ cannot blindfold intellectual observers from the aesthetic energy of the plays – their themes, philosophies, metaphors and cultural idioms. Attention is also drawn to the “popularity and wide appeal of his other works such as *The Lion and The Jewel, The Trials of Brother Jero, The Strong Breed*” (413). What is more appropriate to glean from the foregoing favourable and unfavourable remarks is that Soyinka and Clark are dramatist intellectuals writing for readers of like
minds, high intellectuals who can competently reason out the logic in all the playwrights’ absurdism and poetic symbolism. Again, referring to Soyinka specifically, it is tenable to posit that his less metaphysical and surrealist works lay claim to a wider reception.

Lending credence to this inference, P. Emeka Nwabueze in his article – “Ranking of African Literary Writers and the Canonization of Texts” asserts:

Soyinka has been accused of general obscurantism and inability to communicate, but while such criticism may be sustained in his poems and novels, his plays display glaring sophistication of style and dialogue which are sustained not through borrowing from western masters but by rooting his ideals on Yoruba culture. What many readers describe as obscurity in Soyinka’s plays is the playwright’s ability to depart from realism and introduce surrealistic or absurdist approach to dramaturgy. Even when he writes a historical play like Death and the King’s Horseman, his elegant language and sophisticated dramatic structure help to turn an otherwise regional experience into a universal situation (200).

J.P. Clark, however, cannot in all respects of critical reception be rated equal to Soyinka. If he is as highly esteemed as Soyinka for employing African metaphysical structure, thereby promoting the culture, he cannot receive such credit in many other respects. “Although his early plays succeed theatrically in poetic and dramatic intensity, they represent only a partial success … in transplanting Greek and Shakespearean models onto an African setting” (Okagbue 165). Again, his low reception may be attributed to his concern in his earlier plays
like *Ozidi, Song of a Goat, The Raft*, for “Elizabethan blank verse and echoes of Gerald Manley Hopkins and other models” (165). These lacked the African linguistic idioms and made the plays strange and abstract, even absurd. Clark’s lower critical esteem in this ranking could also be attributed to what P. Emeka Nwabueze calls his failure “to create memorable or dignified” characters (200). Deriving from this assessment it can be understood that the works lacked sublimity and psychological depth. Clark’s plays in the 1960s can therefore be seen as lacking strong attraction for readers, and theatre producers who preferred to spend their intellectual energy on more interesting, easily interpreted, psychologically and artistically sublime plays. The plays in question here are *Song of a Goat, The Raft, The Masquerade and Ozidi*.

Ola Rotimi with his plays is another important focus of this historical era – 1960 to 1980. Many writers have acknowledged this playwright’s dramaturgical successes that earned him a doubtlessly high esteem. In Martin Banham’s estimation, Rotimi’s Drama is notable for its quality of nationality (707). In other words the whole of Nigeria is Rotimi’s source material. This implies that Ola Rotimi draws his dramatic themes, characters, language nuances and a wide range of physical and vocal action from Nigerian and African speech idioms (Banham 709). These features are obvious in Rotimi’s plays in varying degrees. In *The Gods are Not to Blame*, the “Theme of ethnic distrust” (Banham 709) that pervaded the entire Nigeria in 1960s, and led to a civil war, is obvious; the mannerisms and linguistic idioms of the Yoruba people, characterize the play. In *Ovonranwen Nogbaisi*, the culture, language parlance and character traits of
typical Edo and Ijekiri people are depicted. For example, Obayuwana, a ‘Benin
chief’ cautions:

OBAYUWANA: The language of the drum is Ijekiri your
majesty! It warns of grave anger approaching Benin! (Rotimi 27)

The picture created here is about Benin and its culture.

Commenting on the language employed in Rotimi’s *Hopes of the Living
Dead*, Uko Atai points out that the play “involves a gathering of ethnic languages
quite in the manner of what obtains at international (i.e. multilingual)
conferences” (36), while Simon Obikpeko Umukoro states that:

The characters of the play, ‘are chosen to reflect the ethnic
homogeneity of the Nigerian polity represented in the play by the
multi-tenanted building’ (Rotimi, 83:1). Thus, Betty Oviamwen
represents Edo, Akpan and Ukoh are Ibibios, Chinwe Ejindu and
Onyema Ejindu are Ibos… (24)

These examples can serve as indication that Rotimi’s plays pose no difficulties in
communication and enlistment of interest of Nigerian readers following the
employment of familiar experiences, and the domestication of English language
expression for purposes of effective communication. The question may be asked,
what are the reception levels of the three dramatists so far examined with their
plays?

From the foregoing analysis, it is obvious that all the dramatists command
critical reputation as intellectuals who put skill, learning, intercultural exposure,
deep philosophical and ideological insight to the service of humanity through the
art of playwriting. But while Soyinka earns the critical grumbles of less
intellectual readers for refusing to offer his services on a platter of gold, choosing to be oblique to allow for more universal, imaginative and far reaching interpretation of his works, Rotimi labours to reach his readers directly, making efforts to dance to the tune of a greater majority of readers, which he achieves. J.P Clark is also critically acclaimed as “innovative” (Nwabueze) and oblique through his dramatic motifs. But he is less prolific and profound in writing than Soyinka and Rotimi, while his overall reputation as a playwright ranks lower than his other two contemporaries.

Thus, considering the above observations, and taking the pulse of competent and intellectual readers and critics, one can conclude that Soyinka is better received among intellectuals but with many less academic readers his reception remains low. Rotimi follows closely on Soyinka’s heels for his wide fame in creative adaptation, artistic dexterity and communicative writing though he is less esteemed among high intellectuals because his works bandy to the choice of more local readers. Reputed and acclaimed more as a poet, Clark does not lose out completely. But his lack of prolificity and inability to allow traditional structures to dominate classical and Western literary elements, reduce critical approval of his works to the lowest position. He scores a high mark however than other minor playwrights of his generation who had earlier been overlooked in this work for having no critical reputation as career writers.

Another playwright of the first generation that cannot be left without mentioning is Zulu Sofola, a female writer who is highly reputed and distinguished among other women playwrights in Nigeria. Sofola towers above the likes of Tess Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo, Onyeka Onyekuba. Her major plays
are The Disturbed Peace of Christmas (1971), Wedlock of the Gods (1972), King Emene (1974), The Wizard of Law (1975), The Sweet Trap (1977), Old Wines are Tasty (1981). She is esteemed as “a female writer with a solid traditional stance” (Chukwuma 101), counted along with novelists like Nwapa, Ba, Emecheta, Okoye, Alkali as female writers that raise issues about “the subsuming position of women in the marriage institution and the attendant problems (107). According to Emeka Nwabueze, Zulu Sofola is among Nigerian playwrights ‘yet struggling for greatness’. These playwrights address contemporary issues in a way that evokes attention but are unable to combine profundity or theme with excellence in dramatic technique (201).

Olu Obafemi remarks that “there is a certain general paucity of critical work on Sofola” which is “probably due to … simple monolithic plots, the negative and ineffectual employment of elements of myth, magic and ritual, and the often impossible and implausible conflict resolution which characterize most of her works” (65). Sofola is also accused of using her art to advocate the reign of old tradition, hence Obafemi urges that, rather than advocate the continued subjugation of the female folk in particular and humanity in general to old, outdated lore and burdens, she should strive towards the emancipation of her sex, in particular and the liberation of humanity in general, from enslaving codes, icons and ideas; in spite of this unpalatable perception, Obafemi declares that “Sofola is simple, clear and lucid as far as linguistics expression is concerned” (65).

Two vital questions arise from the preceding:

- How true are the above opinions viz-a-viz particular works of Sofola?
Can one consider her works as highly or lowly esteemed by Nigerian critics, readers and theatre producers? Commenting on her works like *King Emene, Wedlock of the Gods, the Sweet Trap, Old Wines are Tasty* and *Memories in the Moonlight*, Ayo Akinwale opines that these plays “are based on the traditional setting, a style which makes her preoccupation in this direction quite a unique one” (68). Akinwale’s view, notwithstanding, it is tenable to opine that, to some extent Sofola’s works are poorly received. If there is paucity of critical work on her plays, as well as shortcomings of theme, technique and commitment, as opined above by Nwabueze and Obafemi, then much remains to be done to raise reception. At any rate, when one considers the impact of her plays in tertiary institutions with academic theatre departments, it becomes obvious that Sofola does not lose out completely. Her works enjoy some, but not a high reception.


Radical theatre here refers to a mode of playwriting and play production which emerged in Nigeria during the 1970s, grew in popularity by 1980s and continued to influence contemporary playwriting beyond the 1990s. Also conceptualized as ‘revolutionary’, and “progressive” (Uji 45), the theatre pursued the objective of arousing “revolutionary” consciousness against oppression and other social evils in the society, while its playwrights are referred to as ‘Marxist writers’.

Emeka P. Nwabueze pinpoints these playwrights as “Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande and Tunde Fatunde”, stating that they have “established reputation as ‘revolutionaries’ in Nigeria” (200). Included as radical writers are Kole Omotoso,
Fela Davis, Comish Ekiye, Soji Simpson, and regarding them as “a crop of playwrights, whose temperament and vision were hardened … by the wounds and trauma of the civil war”, Yemi Ogunbiyi states that “some of these writers have not been accorded the recognition they deserve even in Nigeria” (36). Among the above stated playwrights, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Tunde Fatunde and Kole Omotoso are well recognized and have established critical reputation due to their prolificity and popularity in academic parlance and high promises of their sociopolitical commitment. Moreover, their dexterity in employing the aesthetics of the Epic theatre to articulate the Marxist ideology in Nigeria was a new trend that attracted attention and popularized them within the elitist circles where they mostly operated. The Marxist socialist ideology which gave root to the Brechtian theatre model, in the words of Staurt Hall, David Hell and Tony McGrew was developed by Marx:

Marx developed a highly particular conception of socialism, as the self-emancipation of the working class. ‘The emancipation of the working class must be achieved by the working class itself’ (Marx and Engels, 1975 vol. 24 p. 269 … the exploited class in capitalist society, collectivized by the very condition of production it experiences, has the interest and capacity and will develop the organization and consciousness required to inaugurate a classless society (51).

Having been oriented towards the above aesthetic and ideological antecedents, the radical playwrights emerged in Nigeria in the 1970s, drawing critical and dramaturgical attentions. Among the recognized playwrights, as
earlier pointed out in this study, Femi Osofisan and Bode Sowande are regarded as being at the vanguard of the group (Uji 45). Stressing that “Osofisan outclasses the others due to his “multi-thematic exploration and dramaturgical innovations”, Emeka P. Nwabueze also agrees that “Bode Sowande shows equal concern with contemporary issues, notably exploitation and oppression of the masses, by the feudal class” (200).

Sola Fosudo maintains that,

In all, there is a general consensus by the critics of Osofisan that he creates through his writing the awareness for responsible leadership in society, the consequences of misplaced priorities in decision-making, and the results of societal vices such as corruption, non-accountability and despotism. These themes are clearly portrayed in plays such as *Once Upon Four Robbers, Who is Afraid of Solarin and Many Coloures Make The Thunder King* (117-118)

Osofisan is also well reputed as a pro-democratic writer, as shown in his plays like *Morountodun, The Chattering and the Song, Twingle Twangle: A Twyning Tayle, Many Colours …* (118). At any rate, despite the perception of Osofisan as the highest in the scoring of the Marxist dramaturgy and the consideration of Sowande as equal to him in ideological projection,

Osofisan, Sowande and Fatunde (as well as Kole Omotoso) see society as a coercive system where privileged segments of society benefit from social arrangements at the expense of the less privileged groups. They offer revolution as the only solution to the problem (Nwabueze 201).
From the foregoing, it becomes clear that all the radical playwrights – Osofisan, Sowande, Fatunde and Omotoso – enjoy ample reputation. But certain negative reactions against the aesthetic quality of their plays, the weakness and irrelevance of their vision in Nigeria, and the degree of failure in realizing their ideological pursuit, tend to undermine the high esteem in which the radical playwrights would have been held. Simon Obikpeko Umukoro argues that “a note of caution” should be passed “to the audience/readers and thus, guide their response to radicalism in Nigerian drama” because, a close analysis of the new plays (the radical plays) reveals crude delineation of character, inadequacies of plot and unskillful handling of myth. Also, the alternative politico-economic order they envision is limited in its relevance to Nigerian society (21).

Using Femi Osofisan’s Morountodun (1982) and No More the Wasted Breed (1982); Bode Sowande’s The Night Before (1979) and Kole Omotoso’s Shadows in the Horizon (1972) as examples, Umukoro illustrates the above shortcomings which, for want of space cannot be expatiated here. Nevertheless a few remarks are imperative. Umukoro posits that the characters in Morountodun, apart from Titubi who undergoes transition, do not develop, they are static, they are not “individualized”, and the mode of characterization “is based on certain assumption which is very hard to accept” (24). Umukoro further points out:

The radical plays are composed of stereotypes – characters who do not live, just images used to express the various pre-existing dogmas on Marxism transferred to the Nigerian setting. Beside the aesthetic flaws of this practice, it has concealed the real enemies of the masses of the Nigerian people. In addition, the plays seek the
solution to the crisis in doctrinaire socialism thereby stressing the abundance of material wealth instead of equal rights and justice as the precondition for socialism in Nigeria. … Also, commitment to Marxism has befogged the sensibility of Nigerian radical dramatists; so much that they are unresponsive to the valid ways to national development enshrined in their culture and mythical past (37).

Hence, rather than extol the Marxist approach, Umukoro condemns its tenets, suggesting a recourse to African cultural and mythical sources, towards articulating the sociopolitical struggle. Elaborating on what they describe as “shortfall of the Nigerian radical theatre movement”, Dauda Musa Enna and Victor A. Anyagu try to prove that, despite minor successes of the radical theatre, such as its creation of sociopolitical and economic awareness in Nigeria, and its contribution to the development of radical thought in literary and academic circles, the theatre has failed to achieve “wholesome success” as would be expected, judging from its “elitist” disposition, its failure to reach the “revolutionary target” (including even the target audience). Its change of focus from sociopolitical struggle to commercial pursuit greatly weakened its capacity to effect change in the society. The radical theatre’s use of colonial language, and its dramatization of tribal, rather than universal myths derived from the national archives to ensure its intelligibility to larger number of Nigerians, also hindered its efficacy.

The above pitfalls definitely reduced the reception of the revolutionary theatre. But it is tenable to assert here that the playwriting techniques of the
Marxist writers, their attempts to articulate their ideology through the epic mode, and their ability to create sociopolitical awareness and increase radical thinking among the elites won some critical commendation. Moreover, the achievements of the theatre are acknowledged as an artistic innovation which gears contemporary theatre towards greater aesthetic movements for sociopolitical change. For instance, the suggestions made by the radical mode towards the possible exploitation of African folklore, culture and national myths for the theatre of sociopolitical struggle cannot be under-rated or ignored. Indeed, dramatists are beginning to embrace this suggestion beyond the 1990s.

3.4 Radical Tendencies in Post-Independence Literary Theatre

(1990 To 2010): A Critical Survey

Radicalism continued as an artistic temperament among Nigerian playwrights during the period 1990 to 2010. One of the reasons adduced for this was the unceasing disorderliness of sociopolitical atmosphere and the growing tepidity and unpopularity of the Western theatre aesthetics in Nigeria by the close of 20th century. Bayo Ogunjimi rightly points out that “the chaotic close of the twentieth century poses greater challenges for the African artist and critic, probably more than any other historical moment” (85), hence the persistence of radicalism among artists. However, in its aesthetics, and ideological tendencies, this radicalism of the recent period varies in many respects from that of the earlier revolutionaries, and agrees with it in a few instances. For example there is a serious attempt to replace the Brechtian epic aesthetics and the core Marxist socialist ideologies with traditional African performance techniques and ideology.
Critical appreciation of recent radicalism in theatre can be effectively surveyed through a close study of readers’ reactions to the theories and playwriting practices attributed to artists like Sam Ukala, Emeka Nwabueze, Tess Onwueme, Bakare Ojo Rasaki and Esiaba Irobi. Writing in his introduction to the text, *Sam Ukala: His Work at Sixty*, A.O Asagba describes Ukala as a sincere, unique and serious artist who is committed “to use theatre as a veritable platform for social transformation and regeneration of society” (9). This observation is often appropriated to many artists who are referred to as radically conscious and to playwrights of the radical school, who, in their aesthetic approaches and ideological bents, advocate radical changes in the status quo. Ukala fits well into this picture, considering his theoretical and creative innovations in literary theatre. For example, in his article “Politics of Aesthetics”, Ukala represents what he calls the laws of aesthetic response which are the underlying principles of his theory of ‘folkism’. According to him,

The laws are eight in number: the Law of Opening; the Law of Joint Performance; the Law of Creativity, Free Enactment and Responsibility; the Law of Judgment; the Law of Expression of the Emotions; the Law of Ego Projection; and the Law of Closing (33). Lack of space does not permit the elaboration of these laws, but it is important to examine one of them briefly, as illustrated by Ukala:

Law 1: The law of opening. There is a convention for opening a folktale performance in black Africa. It serves three functions: arouses the audience; offers it an opportunity to encourage or stop a prospective narrator, depending on the audience’s rating of the
narrator (casting!); introduces major characters and/or the temporal and spatial settings of the story. The audience may be aroused by a call, to which it responds, or by a song, which it joins in… (33).

This brief illustration already vindicates the theories as thought-out and articulated move towards a literary African theatre that is yet to be equaled in its freshness and innovation.

Commenting on Ukala’s aesthetic radicalism, Austin Amanze Akpuda acknowledges that Ukala belongs to the ‘revolutionary’ school of contestants on the authentication of African drama (20), while Asagba notes that this revolutionary playwright formulated “the theory of ‘Folkism’ which becomes a method and form of his drama”, thereby creating a niche for himself among scholars and critics alike (9). ‘Folkism’, according to Ukala, is:

An emergent aesthetic principle (285) ... the tendency to base literary plays on the history, culture, and concerns of the folk … and to compose and perform them in accordance with African conventions for composing and performing the folktale noted for its ‘clear communication and its popularity among the folk’, among the many reasons why ‘it should provide a matrix for folkism’ (qtd in Akpuda 40)

This theory qualifies as a radical departure from other folkist attempts. Folkism with its eight laws of aesthetic response that are applied in Ukala’s dramaturgy makes him a radical playwright, due to the effective innovation and change he brings to theatre. Since Ukala skillfully applied the folkist theory and its practices, an appreciation of critical reception of his plays can highlight some
The major features of that theatre form. The plays include *The Placenta of Death*, *Akpakaland* and *The Slave Wife*.

According to Akpuda “Ukala affirms how his own theatre (folkist theatre) is a radical departure from previous experimentations with folklore” (41). Comparing his folkist techniques in his play *Placenta of Death* and the methods in other plays like *Ozidi* and, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Ukala notes that while his play (Placenta …) involves audience interjection and audience empathy, J.P. Clark and Efua Sutherland’s *Ozidi* and *The Marriage of Anansewa* respectively do not do so. By directing attention to this quality of Ukala’s play, Akpuda vindicates his high regard for the text.

Although the preceding suggestions focus on ‘performance’ as its ultimate target, it must be repeated here that one of the pre-conditions for a good performance is competent reading and interpretation of play script. Hence, the proposal is as relevant for the reading audience as it is for play directors and theatre goers. While still discussing the radicalism in folkism, Chibueze Prince Orie in his article, “Destiny and the Man: Sam Ukala’s Folkist Mythological Ritualism in *The Slave Wife*”, maintains that *The Slave Wife* is an “African lore, that of the sure triumph of the less privileged or the unrestrainable destiny of the downtrodden, the persecuted” (113), it is a folkist play, the actors have a close link with the audience, there are “oral nuances of the folk, their proverbs, imagery, idiophones, etc … are made manifest in the dramatic tale” (115). There is ritual – a fundamental element of folkism (116). The folks believe in gods, hence, the dictates of the gods, are adhered to. There is fantasy when the “old man returns the babe to Igbon, may be after fully undergoing ritual fortification” (117); the
message of the play is also folkloric “where justice prevails over injustice, the
downtrodden is raised at last” (119). This play largely embodies folkist qualities,
therefore, although it was published before the theory of folkism emerged, it
foreshadowed folkist playwriting and a new radical method of exploiting literary
drama for sociopolitical struggle.

Writing on Ukala’s film – *Akpakaland* – which is not only an adaptation of
his play of the same title, but also an adoption of similar ideological and aesthetic
concerns, Ifeanyi, Ogu-Raphael opines:

> The revolutionary (radical) tendency in the film (or the play script)
is fully sensed as one is presented with too classes of people, the
rich and the poor, akin to the Marxian bourgeoisie and the
proletariat and the agitation for equal rights and justice … (169).

Ogu Raphael further opines that Ukala in *Akpakaland* “… has systematically
called for the eradication of all bourgeoisie forms in our society and an
enthronement of an egalitarian society advocated by Karl Max and others” (169).
This clarifies the radical tendency in the play, as manifest in the film. The play, as
in the film of its adaptation, “takes the form of narration in the typical African
performance style, but is set in a modern society, with a blend of traditionalism
and modern paraphernalia” (166). This description suggests that the play,
*Akpakaland* fulfils the radical aesthetics of folkism.

In Ukala’s *Break a Boil*, radicalism is also implied in the following views
of Alex Asigbo (2008).

> The playwright (in *Break a Boil*) … tells us that it is only
affirmative action on the part of the people that can arrest the drift
towards decadence. If the land must be healed, the people must take their destiny into their own hands, positive and populist change is therefore the panacea to immoral acquisition and wielding of illegitimate power (235).

Ukala’s *Break a Boil*, thematizes the moral that power acquired illegitimately is never enjoyed with peace of mind (235). To corroborate the preceding reports on folkism which are presented by Akpuda, Ukala’s writing which is entitled “‘Folkism’: Towards a National Aesthetic Principle in Dramaturgy”, is significant. Here, Ukala identifies the problems of Nigerian literary theatre, which hinder its favourable reception, and unequivocally suggests folkism as a remedial measure. According to him,

It has been alleged by A. Bodunrin, Oyin Ogunba, Bode Osayin and Biodun Jeyifo, among others, that the plays, written in English, by Nigerian literary playwrights are usually unpopular with the Nigeria’s socioeconomic problems. The unpopularity of the Nigerian literary plays has been attributed by these critics, mainly to language: (i) the language is foreign and illiterate Nigerians do not understand it; (ii) it is deliberately made too difficult for the average literate Nigerian to comprehend. The criticism that the plays are ineffective in helping to tackle Nigeria’s socio-economic problems is expressed in three main ways: (i) subject matter does not reflect the recent history and current aspirations of Nigerians and is, therefore, irrelevant; (ii) subject-matter may be rooted in Nigeria’s history and culture but it is often distorted beyond the
recognition and appeal of the Nigerian masses, as a result of which values are lost which the plays were intended to communicate. (iii) subject-matter may be rooted in Nigeria’s history and culture and may not even be distorted beyond recognition, but it may be presented in such a foreign or unfamiliar manner as the generality of Nigerians may not identify with (11).

Following his assessment of the foregoing criticisms, by which he isolates the genuine deficiencies of the literary theatre in Nigeria, Ukala proposes ‘folkism’ as an aesthetic principle that may provide remedies for these deficiencies” (11). Although many references have already been made in this work concerning the tenets of ‘folkism’, it is imperative at this stage to represent them as Ukala’s further exposition of steps towards the enhancement of reception for literary theatre in Nigeria. According to him,

Surely, J.P. Clark in Ozidi, entrenched some techniques of traditional African folktale performance – the opening and closing formula; the use of narrator; audience-involvement; preserving the identity of a source while adapting new experience to it, the use of the simple plot structure; familiar but artistic diction; advancing the story through the repetition of similar events and leitmotifs. In this, Clark (now Clark Bekederemo) compares favourably with Efua Sutherland in The marriage of Anansewa, which strongly reflects the Akan techniques of composing and performing folktales…. Apart from popularity and effectiveness, an indigenous dramatic aesthetic principle, which may be called ‘folkism’ may derive from
the use in the African literary theatre of folk linguistic, structural and performance styles (38).

Justifying his proposal for folkism as a measure for aesthetic enhancement, Ukala further avers,

There are three main reasons why the African folktale seems to provide the matrix for such an experiment:

i. The folktale and the conventional literary play are narratives which are ultimately realized in performance.

ii. In performance, the folktale and the play are temporal, mimetic, interpretive and synthetic;

iii. Unlike other traditional artistic performances in Africa, the folktale, like the play, entails much speech. It is now for the Nigerian literary playwright to study deeply the techniques of the African folktale and to, subsequently, test our hypothesis in his next play (38).

The radical tendencies in the above plays are also present in Emeka Nwabueze’s works: *Guardian of the Cosmos, When the Arrow Rebounds and A Parliament of Vultures*. According to Uche-Chinemere Nwaozuzu, *Guardian of the Cosmos* “highlights the predicaments of a society in the clutches of a cabal which wrests power fraudulently from the rightful candidate and in the process disrupts the cosmic balance” (1-9), “the solution”, as also suggested in Ukala’s *Break a Boil*, “could only be sought for and found in a complete moral re-orientation” (3). This also calls for revolutionary action against the fraudulent power holders in order to restore cosmic balance. In Nwabueze’s *Guardian of the*
Cosmos, if the people had rejected the usual “money politics” in the society, and upheld the choice of Ezeudo, perhaps, the cosmic order would have remained intact.

Chinyere Ngonebu also alludes to this radical tendency in Guardian of the Cosmos, in her article … “Values and Representations in Emeka Nwabueze’s Guardian of the Cosmos: A Study in Evocative Ethos”. Here she extols the revolutionary consciousness of the masses in plays such as Tunde Fatunde’s No Food, No Country and No More Oil Boom, but underlines Nwabueze’s condemnation of the masses in Guardian of the Cosmos for their inactivity and unrevolutionary stance. Ngonebu highlights the play’s call for change and points out that Nwabueze’s play offers a refreshingly different and appealing dimension of the political scenario (117). For example, rather than instigating revolutionary action in the masses by making the political leaders the main butt of attack, the play rather indicts the masses, sensitizing them through that, to drop their immoral sense and turn away from “greed and love for money …” (116). This is akin to Ola Rotimi’s recommendation in his play if … A Tragedy of the Ruled where he pushes a similar logic to Nwabueze’s position above, that moral revolution (change) on the part of the masses will be more effective than violent move. Thus, Nwabueze displays radicalism by departing from the usual revolutionary logic followed by playwrights of the Marxist breed – like Osofisan, Sowande and Fatunde – who make the political leaders the only culprits of revolutionary condemnation in order to instigate the consciousness of the masses; he rather advances the ideology of provoking the masses to attack their own conscience first, and stand up to better ethics, to enable them make the right choice of leaders.
Radical tendencies in Emeka Nwabueze’s works are more highly received in his play – *A Parliament of Vultures*. The play is presented as a thorough-going analysis of the political terrain in Nigeria. According to Oyibo Eze, in his article “Political Jobbers and the leadership question”,

*A Parliament of Vultures* ... is perhaps, the first published play that examines the vulgar realities, indiscipline and unflattering characters that infest our nascent democracy. In this play, Nwabueze through his exposition of the activities of legislators, weighs the democrats in the balance of power and find them much more vulnerable than the military in their mis-rule and inability to improve the quality of life of the people (212).

This play is radical, in other words, it is fearless, unequivocal, fundamentally realistic, and leads the way in critically exposing the ugly political atmosphere in Nigeria. The play also is received readily as a radical material due to its call for “militant uprising against parliament” (Eze 214), which smacks of Marxist ideology. Again, the play’s turn away from Brechtian epic model to realistic illusion demonstrates the playwrights radical rejection of an apparently established aesthetic cliché of revolutionary writing. Nwabueze therefore asserts his new brand of radicalism which is a medley of realistic aesthetic and the Marxist ideology. It is therefore a departure from the articulation of Marxism through the Brechtian epic dramaturgy.

The recent plays of Tess Onwueme – a female writer – also demonstrate radical temperament. According to Mabel I.E. Evwierhoma.
From a preoccupation with tradition, she has relocated her stance to politics and the place of individuals and groups especially those of African descent, in global affairs...the aesthetics of her recent plays is radical and condemnatory of exploitation. Rather than be a woman centered playwright, Onwueme now fashions the concerns of her drama on the human condition worsened by the unequal social structure in the polity (1).

If radicalism includes – as already portrayed in this work-important changes, progressive innovations in the usual pattern of doing things – then a lot of radical attributes are embodied in the above picture of Tess Onwueme’s works. Her recent plays include *Riot in Heaven* (1997), *Shakara: Dance Hall Queen* (2001), *Then She Said It* (2002) and *What Mama Said* (2003). Some of the plays represent aesthetic rebirth of previous works. *What Mama Said* is a “a variation on the cast, ideas, roles in her preceding play, *Then She Said It*, just as *The Missing Face* is the rebirth of her play *Legacies*”, hence, Evwierhoma points out that “transposing the names of characters, rewriting some aspects of the plot, inventing and reworking texts is a feature of post modernity” (2). This dramaturgical turn-around embodies aesthetic and ideological radicalism which enables the recent plays to modernize and globalize their themes by transcending the local terrain of the texts.

It is also observed by Evwierhoma that “Women in Tess Onwueme’s plays eternally group up to subvert male or patriarchal authority” (5). As if this radical implication of the texts does not suffice, in *What Mama Said*, particularly, political struggles, “conflict and insurgency against the oppressors or big
businessmen”, reactions against male domination, all portray Onwueme’s support for radical move to subvert and undermine patriarchal challenges (8).

Generally, critical interpretations of recent plays dominantly point at their radical tendencies. Alex Asigbo and Tracie Utoh – Ezeajuh support this view when they opine that,

From … Irobi’s Nwokedi where the youths’ traditional Ekpe Festival is turned by the Ekumeku into a ritual cleaning of corrupt politicians in the land, Nwabueze’s A Parliament of Vultures, where the students seize the initiative and dismantle a self-serving government and its equally corrupt legislature, to Rasaki’s This Land Must Sacrifice, where again the youths mutiny to overthrow a corrupt leader and his cabal of equally corrupt chiefs, it will be observed that a noticeable trend of proposing mutiny as an antidote to dictatorship is outstanding in Nigerian drama (122).

With this radical picture of the recent Nigerian literary theatre in view, it is important to note that two new trends of radicalism also surfaced during the period in question. These are the radical changes in dramaturgy and aesthetics, then the radical preference for moral revolution instead of violent action.

From the foregoing analysis, it is obvious that the large percentage of the works of recent post-Independence playwrights is highly received as a result of their radical inclinations. Sam Ukala’s folkist aesthetic innovations, Emeka Nwabueze’s fresh approach to political consciousness – indicting the masses and calling for their self-orientation and his realist revolutionary inspiration in Parliament of Vultures – are highly esteemed by critics. The radical feminists’
inclination of female writers, and the employment of the folk tradition – the ‘Ekumeku’ - as political revolutionary, aesthetic, is all highly esteemed ideological and dramaturgical innovations of the recent Nigerian dramatists. However, as will be enunciated later in this work, the period 1990 to 2010 also embodied certain negative influences that jostled the above gains and generated some level of critical disapproval.

3.5 Summary and Conclusion

In this review, the term ‘reception’ has been used as:

- Appraisal
- Assessment
- Esteem

Hence, literary theatre reception has been conceptualized here as the appraisal and esteem of works of playwrights in Nigeria from the point of view of readers and critics. This assessment focused on the aesthetic qualities, ideological bents and dramaturgical approaches of the playwrights in some of their plays that served as sample materials. Because there were lack of indigenous plays of serious dramatic quality during the period 1948 to 1960, Old Classics and English plays were used as parameters for judging literary theatre of that era. Generally, the period under study was 1948 to 2010, which was split into four chronological sections, each of which was linked to a specific historical development that helped to nurture sociopolitical events of the period and influenced the trends of theatre and drama.

Plays of the first chronological division are referred to as the colonial theatre, spanning the period 1948 to 1960. The second division spanned 1960 to 1980 and is called post colonial theatre, the third and fourth divisions were called
radical theatre in Nigeria and the recent post independence theatre respectively. They spanned the periods 1970 to 1990, and 1990 to 2010 respectively. Through this outline, the review has led to the discovery of different levels of reception – critical appraisal, or judgment towards each chronological division. There has been a poor reception of colonial plays and their authors due to their elitist, imperialistic, cultural, subjugative qualities, as well as its communicative limitations. Theoretically, following the reader response criticism, the colonial theatre was still very alien to the horizons of expectation of Nigerians as at the historical period in question. However, considered as a nascent literary theatre in Nigeria, the plays were appraised highly for serving as study materials in ‘educational drama’, and ‘theatre in education’.

There was a better reception of the post colonial theatre, for its ability to integrate traditional Nigerian elements, its rich communicative potential and its moves towards cultural retrieval. But this theatre (1960 to 1990) was not without accusations of dramaturgical obscurities, and critical misinterpretations of plays. Therefore, the reception would have been higher if the hindrances of its high intellectuality and obscurities were not conflicting with the popular appeal of some of its plays. Due to the numerous shortcomings of the revolutionary theatre during the period 1970 to 1990s, its reception was undermined. However, the theatre enjoyed some level of reception in academic circles due to its encouragement of radical thought and its arousing of political consciousness.

The recent post independence theatre is highly appraised for its dramaturgical innovations, as seen in folkism and the folkist approach to sociopolitical change; for its new radical approach to urgent national issues, such
as its indictment of the masses for misusing their opportunities; for its new trends in women’s struggle against male domination, and for its overall stimulation of greater aesthetic energy towards the year 2011 and beyond. Moreover this period represents the harnessing of the lessons of previous theatrical decades in Nigeria, including the need to eschew ideological, linguistic, thematic shabbiness, and the need to avoid sociopolitical, cultural and dramaturgical hindrances to high reception.

In the final analysis, it can be concluded that each historical period embodies obvious gray areas that reduce their reception, and some strong qualities that create chances for their approval. The shortfall of each period from the colonial, through the post-colonial to the revolutionary era, calls for thorough examination, in order to make amends; the strong qualities of each theatre development must be studied, exploited and enhanced for the future growth and better judgment of literary theatre in Nigeria. It is however pertinent to note that the kind of reception accorded to a play text does not always depend on the quality of the play. At times, reception tendency is contingent on the orientation of the textual readers and their competence in reading. Hence, it is pertinent to examine more deeply, the significance of the reader and reading in reception praxis.
CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 READER AND READING: FUNCTIONAL IMPERATIVES OF RECEPTION

The objective of this chapter is three fold: to clarify the position of this study that literary theatre reception should be viewed from the point of view of textual reading which, in its practical pinnacle, is referred to as criticism; to validate the status of play readers and their readings, as the central essence of reception; and to demonstrate that the psychological, intellectual, sociological, economic and political disposition of textual readers also contribute to poor perceptions (reception) of the literary drama in Nigeria. The text alone does not dictate its reception.

4.1 Literary Theatre Reception as a Function of Textual Reading

Reading a play is an art that should be exercised with care. Commenting on the art of reading, Andrew Milner writes, “reading is a highly specialized form of cultural reception, requiring extensive cultural training” (119). This expression echoes the idea that ‘reading’ is ‘receiving’ while the reader is the receiver. The term ‘receive’ has lexical connotations, two of which are apt for this discourse: “to experience” and “to accept as authoritatively sound and valid” (The New Webster’s 832). Hence, the reading of a dramatic text constitutes its reception as it entails the experiencing of the compositional elements of the drama, and accepting its validity-though in varying critical degrees.

But the question to ask here is whether every textual reading is viewed as reception. Altic R. declares that “everybody (who can read) reads something nowadays, but only a small minority reads wisely or well” (qtd in Milner 121).
Therefore, all readings qualify as reception but categories of readers and readings can be delineated. In the cultural discipline of dramatic art, there are critics, reviewers, assessors, scholars who must read written works before they execute their jobs. These are readers, who, by virtue of their “extensive cultural training”—say in the relevant ethics of reading dramatic compositions—can be categorized as recipients (receivers) or agents of theatre reception. Their critical reading approaches to texts make them receptive agents par excellence, and they are the category that professionally engages in publishing critical essays, books and commentaries. In their writings, they portray different perceptions about plays, expressing total validation, some shortfall or outright disapproval. They also document their overall perception about the entire written drama as a practice in Nigeria.

Outside this category of readers or recipients, there are readers among the general public, within the government, the university academia, corporate bodies, schools and colleges who read drama scripts, appreciate them in different ways and hold tacit opinions about written drama generally; but, not being professional critics, they may not organize their perceptions in written documents. These readers are also included in this work as agents of reception. The reader-response theory asserts that when textual readers (of all categories) belong to a given historical period (say Nigeria within 1948 to 2010), they devise for themselves the criteria that they use in judging play texts and literary drama generally. These criteria are derived from the critical vocabulary of the historical period, the available critical theories, the readers’ world view and social experiences, their
levels of education. These as H.R. Jauss maintains, are referred to as ‘horizons of expectation’ as expounded in the reception theory of the reader-response criticism.

This relationship linking the art of reading, the reader, the text and literary drama generally calls for a closer study of the central position of the reader in reception praxis. The essence of this is to examine the functions of the reader, explore his critical, economic, sociological and political relevance to reception, and demonstrate how his psychological and intellectual traits influence his receptive temperament and lead to poor reception. The reader-response criticism asserts further that texts alone cannot determine their reception but must yield to the readers’ critical interpretation and extra intellectual contributions. Texts cannot be appraised on the basis of their structural contents alone, which only contribute to the textual judgment when they transact (Holland 65) with the reader. Thus, the reader and the text must work together to engender positive or negative reception of dramatic texts or literary drama as a discipline.

Readers therefore, possess evaluative, supportive and dictatorial functions in the reception of play texts. Before proceeding in this discussion, it is important to outrightly underline the fact that text, drama as a discipline, literary theatre or ‘literary drama, play, are used interchangeably in this work, to the exclusion of stage performance and its audience. Stanley fish’s concept of ‘interpretive communities’ who acquire their own peculiar principles for evaluating drama, and Hans Robert Jauss’ concept of the readers ‘horizons of expectation’—which determine their criteria for appreciating creative works—allude to the critical, evaluative and dictatorial functions of the reader.
4.2 Evaluative, Dictatorial and Complementary Functions of the Reader in Literary Theatre Reception

Sam Smiley points out that “in theatre… (readers) become actively involved in the shaping of the final products” (15), while Chris Nwamuo notes that “the desire to please… (readers) or at least not to offend them, influenced the content of plays ….” (13). These assertions imply that in the literary theatre, critics—readers—take active part in reception and through that, help in shaping Nigerian plays. They point out the flaws and credits of plays thereby enabling playwrights to improve on their dramaturgy or develop more innovations to enhance their acceptability.

A playwright in composing his work, has the desire to please or at least not to offend his target readers. He considers their cultural tastes, their linguistic potentials and their environmental situations. Even when Stanley Glenn opines that the theatre director’s choice of plays should not be made without a study of the theatre goers or potential theatre goers in the community (22), he is alluding to the idea that a playwright’s choice of his aesthetic elements and conventions should not be made without a study of the reading community—the recipient community. Thus, the readers dictate the quality and contents of texts.

When readers-critics evaluate any aspect of a text as unsatisfactory, they cry out in protest, and in doing so, they force other playwrights to adjust their methods. Through these considerations, the critics dictate for playwrights. Thus, the critics’ responses determine whether a play is highly or poorly received. If a text is meeting the evaluative expectations of critical readers, remarks of appreciation enhance the value of the play and add to its reception status.
Rosenblatt, in his phenomenologist standpoint, advocates that the reader is a collaborator with the playwright in creating the play script; he espouses that “the reader is involved in a transactional experience while interpreting a text” (Bressler 65). These roles attributed to the reader indicate his complementary function in play creation and his central position in reception.

4.3 Supportive Functions of Textual Reader in Reception Praxis

In his theory of narratology, Gerald Prince argues that the reader must not be excluded in the analysis of a text, since from a structuralist perspective, he is an indispensable composite of the text. Like Gerald Prince, many writers have testified to the indispensable, complementary and supportive roles of play readers, generally (not only the critics). Although the preceding complementary potentials of the reader serve to vindicate his indispensability in a critical reception of written drama, his supportive function in reception hinges on the economic sociopolitical and cultural concerns. It is in this connection that text and production can enjoy a symbiotic relationship. The good reception of play texts promotes their stage patronage, while economic, social, and political supports for stage, readily find their way into the realm of play texts.

Economically, without the financial support of play readers, drama at the level of playwriting, publishing and distribution suffers. John Elsom, writing on post war British theatre criticism, opines that “critics do have considerable power over the commercial success or otherwise, of productions; and I suspect that for most people working within the theatre that is their chief importance” (1). Susan Bennet, in her book Theatre Audience: A Theory of Production and Reception asserts that, “the survival of theatre is economically tied to a willing audience, not
only those people paying to sit and watch a performance, but increasingly those who approve a government, corporate or other subsidy” (4). This can be exemplified by the fact that play readers abound among the government personnel, corporate bodies, academic institutions, library boards, public organizations, theatre companies and in homes. These readers, not only approve, following their critical appraisal of texts, but recommend to their boards and organizations and request for money towards the acquisition of texts for equipping government, university, public and private libraries.

Through such a move, economic support is provided for playwriting and the first step to the realization of this is the reading of plays. Other supporters apart from government and corporate bodies, are those that Stephen Langley categorizes as “real and potential” audience-including readers- who find plays interesting and are inspired enough to offer financial support through donations to playwrights and purchase of their plays. Langley calls them “that theatre’s primary human resources, its constituency … who assist the operation in a myriad of ways” (280). Thus, drama enjoys support through the sale of play scripts that are well received by readers and through grants from social organizations, public spirited individuals and governments. Testifying to how she was supported economically, a playwright, Julie Bovasso states as follows:

They kept me alive. When I had a grant, I really worked and did some of my best writing …… (qtd in Hill 521)

Commenting further on this issue, he cites the case of Jim Leonard who was thrilled to receive his first grant of almost $2000 from Indiana Arts Commission in 1979, and an NEA grant for $2500 in 1980.
ACBS playwriting Fellowship and a Rockefeller, both for $8000 helped Christopher Durang through two difficult years (Hill 521)

In Nigeria, examples abound of when government, corporate bodies and university authorities called for command performances of approved play texts. *When the Arrow Rebounds* and *A Parliament of Vultures* by Emeka Nwabueze have been regular convocation plays in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, since 2000. Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Femi Osofisan’s *Who is Afraid of Solarin* were regular occurrences, as commissioned by state governments and the university authorities in the University of Jos, between 1979 and 1984. In his essay “Two Decades of Directing Educational Theatre: The Problem of Funding”, Sam Ukala demonstrates that in 1987 and 1989, respectively, the productions of his plays - *The Placenta of Death* and *Beware the United Masses* were sponsored by Bendel State University, Ekpoma (264). Sometimes, even State Executives call for the production of plays, as exemplified by Governor Emeka Omerua’s call for the staging of Emeka Nwabueze’s *Spokesman for the Oracle* in 1985. Just recently, the Federal Road Safety Commission requested the Jos Repertory Theatre to mount the production of Emeka Nwabueze’s *When the Arrow Rebounds* for the International Road Safety Organisation for their annual conference holding at Abuja. According to Patrick-Jude Oteh, the play was subsequently held in other venues in the Federal Capital Territory because of the good reception it received during the opening night. All this gave encouraging financial support to playwrights whose plays were assessed and approved –thus enjoying reception.
The support given to theatre through the approval of readers is not only economical but also sociopolitical. Victor Turner notes that theatre—such as play script—“probes a community’s weaknesses, calls its leaders to account … portrays its conflicts and suggests remedies for them” (1). This is an indication that the readers who are members of the community and form the government personnel constitute the raw materials for dramatic composition, particularly in terms of characterization, diction, artistic embellishment and spectacle for play scripts. Where the script distances from these human resources, the problem of effective communication surfaces.

Ayo Akinwale also indicates that “the theatre at each period must document societal happenings of the period, criticize the mode and means of governance, bring out the attitudinal truth of both the rulers and the ruled ….” (35), while Zulu Sofola evinces: “it is imperative that the characters” in a play “have an existence based on a human community, otherwise, they will have no meaning and would consequently become irrelevant” (68).

There are instances in Nigeria where the political terrain and social dynamics which are constituted by the activities of readers, also supply the contents of plays written. These include Wole Soyinka’s Kongi’s Harvest, Sam Ukala’s The Log in Your Eye, Felix A Akinsipe’s Never and Never (2006), Anyokwu’s Ufuoma (2007) and Uche Nwaozuzu’s The Candles. The people in the society whose characters are dramatized in these plays include the readers of the texts. These readers are the raw materials, as well as the consumers of the products.
In view of literary theatre and culture, the questions that arise, are: do readers, as an integral material for play creation represent any cultural imperative of composition? What interest of the readers is relevant in the polemics about theatre and culture? Generally, culture - like art, economics, politics, and social phenomena - is a supportive material for theatre in the hands of the readers. Playwriting entails cultural symbiosis with the readers. The former draws from the cultural disposition of the latter, who inversely appraise and criticize its products. In other words,

Theatre business is culture dependent, this is because any theatre event is a presentation or re-enactment of an aspect of the society being portrayed … the theatre is at the forefront of the manifestation, presentation, and preservation of man’s culture (Ejeke 1).

Playwrights collect cultural artifacts from the immediate environment of their target readers, synthesize them and preserve them in their play scripts for the edification of the very readers who supplied the cultural resources. The cultural relativist philosophy echoed by R. Jauss’ reception theory argues in favour of the above assertion. This philosophy posits that “any artifact or convention has meaning only in a way relative to its immediate cultural context” (Holman and Harmon 421).

In view of the above, it can be deduced that the readers are of cultural essence in the reception of literary drama. The cultural congruity of the text with the readers’ environment facilitates the critics’ appreciation, which can be more effectively achieved when the readers’ horizons of expectation are reflected in the
text. But these representations of the readers in play texts, have both merits and demerits for critical reception: some critics may, seeing themselves portrayed in the plays which they are expected to appraise, refuse to be objective in appraising them and go ahead to under mark such scripts on the scale of assessment values. This is because, many people refuse to judge themselves objectively. Nevertheless, the advantages of the above representation out-number the disadvantages. For one, plays that reflect a community’s sociocultural and political terrain are more easily interpreted than otherwise, even if foreign artifacts are used to globalize them. Examples are Nigerian plays of English expression like Ola Rotimi the God’s are Not to Blame, Ahmed Yerimas The Silent Gods and Zulu Sofola’s Wedlock of the Gods.

4.4 Psychological Impact of Readers on Reception.

The above remarks concerning the critic or play assessor’s refusal to receive plays objectively when they find their negative character traits depicted smacks of the negative psychological effects on reception. A significant example is the negative reception given to Moliere’s Tartuffe on its first production. As Moliere states in “Preface to Tartuffe”, while discussing the negative reception of the play and the consequent placement of ban on it by Louis XIV in 1664 and 1667,

Eight days after it had been banned, a play called Scaramouche the Hermit was performed before the court; and the king, on his way out, said to his great prince: ‘I should really like to know why the persons who make so much noise about Moliere’s comedy do not say a word about Scaramouche’. To which the Prince replied, ‘It is
because the comedy of *Scaramouche* makes fun of Heaven and religion, which these gentlemen do not care about at all, but that of Moliere makes fun of them, and that is what they cannot bear’ (182).

Readers also contribute psychologically to reception when their psychoanalytic formations about drama and particular play texts within their cultural and sociological milieu, can affect their critical responses to literary drama. How does one assess the psychological conceptions of different categories of readers about drama and what are the impacts of these formations on reception? The psychoanalytic conceptions of drama among readers can be traced to historical, colonial, religious, educational, political, societal and cultural orientation.

Historically, the fortune of drama had mingled between periods of glory, decline and total ostracism. Often, the difficult experiences of drama emanated - apart from wars, changes in world politics - from Christian religious sanctions against what was viewed as drama’s immoral tendencies. This Christian sensibility towards drama, which was suppressed during the medieval era in Europe, rather survived and became rooted tacitly in the subconscious realms of different ages. Through these ages, up till date in Nigeria, drama – irrespective of its enormous social dividends – is viewed as a corrupt institution. This notion that theatre practice is a corrupt field of endeavour tends to be wide spread in Nigeria.

The colonial origins of literary drama in Nigeria and its concomitant writing of English language plays foregrounded the low regard held for drama. Drama came in with Europeans as an unserious pastime for colonial workers at
the inception of colonialism. From this stage, it moved into the church and institutions as concerts and ceremonial entertainments. By the time it started at the University College in Ibadan, the misconception about drama had already been rooted in the psyche of many Nigerians. Hence, the term drama, to the majority, connoted, and still to a large extent, connotes, ‘concert’, ‘carefreeness’, free romance - as was done by Europeans in cinema shows and pictures carried in dramatic advertisements. These colonial attitudes were revolting to indigenous African culture and thus made western drama appear culturally leprous, untouchable and poorly received psychologically.

Educational planners in post independent Nigeria, not being aware of the strong potentials of drama in children’s upbringing, underplayed the teaching of the subject in schools, thus denying the country of theatre culture. Juliana Oko points this out when she writes.

Initiating an individual into theatre and drama right from childhood is a way of inculcating the theatre culture in that person. As the saying goes, a habit once formed is difficult to break … in Great Britain, for example, there are many ‘theatre-in-education’ teams attached to professional repertory theatres. These educational enterprises have been made possible through the practical influence of leaders in the community who believe that theatre plays a major function in the overall education of growing children (411).

The leaders themselves do not have theatre culture; it is difficult for them, therefore, to see the inculcation of it in children as a useful venture. These psychological formations of play readers have been illustrated by theatre scholars,
showing how they have engendered poor reception and its ugly consequences. Sam Ukala, in an interview held with him by this writer, at the Nasarawa State University, Keffi, during a conference held by the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA) from 2\textsuperscript{nd} to 5\textsuperscript{th} June 2010 pointed out some psychologically induced, negative reception of drama. According to him,

The government always looks one way. We’re too narrow in our minds. Government begins with anti-art policy even in university admissions; more stress is given to sciences than arts. See the world powers; their rock bottom is the arts. Over here in our country, universities can no longer fund the arts. The university sees the theatre artist as a joker. We don’t really have robust theatre practice in universities or anywhere. No infrastructure because of poor funding. About script writing, there are no good teachers of that in most theatre departments. There is mass art patronized by people who are not literarily inclined (interview).

The categories of readers indicted in the above views of Ukala are the government, drama reviewers, assessors of play texts, even theatre scholars. The government is blamed for allowing its low esteem of drama to becloud its psyche in the distribution of structures to universities, whereby theatre departments get poor funds, incompetent staff to teach playwriting and production. Play readers in government who should advice the authorities to disabuse their psyche from its low esteem of the discipline, are also guilty of the same offence, hence, they cannot change the situation.

Ukala further stressed that,
Theatre departments just employ anybody, even people who are not well grounded in the discipline. There is no theatre culture in the universities. In this part of the world, we don’t value drama. Los Angeles – a small city-the home of Hollywood, has thirteen thriving theatres. Maputo in Mozambique has 18. Is there a theatre in Delta State? How many do we have in Abuja? In England we have a lottery called art for everyone. There is no professional theatre company in England that is not sponsored by government. The federal government in Nigeria should spend money on experimentation. There must be a government that will make theatre thrive. If not for anything, but for employment creation. Los Angeles could generate money to be the 5th largest economic centre in the world, why? Because of theatre – 75,000 persons were employed in its theatres. Unless there are policies that will create structures to encourage theatre, we’re going to lose more of theatre practice in future (interview).

The implication of Ukala’s enlightening articulation here is that Nigeria’s psychological attitude predisposes literary theatre to poor reception, leading to lack of seriousness, absence of experimentation and innovation for economic upliftment of the country. Other consequences are poor attention to theatre and the risk of losing the theatre entirely.

In another interview with Sam Kafewo during the same occasion as the above, Kafewo opined that the “British psychology is still with us” in Nigeria, leading to poor funding of theatre, lack of space, absence of material
improvements on theatre staff in universities, neglect of play texts for the taste of Nigerian audiences - readers. British psychology refers to neocolonial tendencies which have continued to fertilize the colonial sensibility in the psyche of play readers, making them remain Eurocentric in their judgment of Nigerian plays. Consequently, drama is still considered a colonial brand of pastime and unserious affair that does not attract necessary attention.

The readers’ intellectual disposition also influences their approach to reception. Scholarship and intellectualism in the arts of dramatic composition and criticism are imperatives in competent readings of Nigerian drama. These are necessary if the critic must appreciate all complexities, absurdities, abstractions and even, banalities in play texts. Scholarship and intellect enable the critic to appreciate the critical theories of dramatic criticism.

4.5 Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated the centrality of the play readers of various categories in the reception praxis. It has shown why reception should be considered as an art of reading, since the judgment of a play’s quality and meaning cannot be achieved without first reading the texts.

The analysis also demonstrates that the psychological temperament of readers towards drama, has attenuated their supportive attitude to playwrights and their plays. This psychological underrating and poor perception of drama, led readers in government, private organizations, academic authorities to care much less about providing the needed infrastructure to beef up the quality of teaching, playwriting and criticism or even to sustain playwrights by making their plays sail and fetch them revenue. Incompetent reading due to shortfall in intellectualism
has also generated defective reception of plays. For example, many readers condemn Wole Soyinka’s drama as absurd and abstract, without tasking their intellect enough to appreciate the reasons for perception of the plays as difficult. Some excursion into the historical antecedents of poor reception will further throw light on factors that allied with readers’ psychological disorientation and functional defects to generate the largely negative perception of literary theatre in Nigeria.
CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF POOR RECEPTION

Poor reception of dramatic literature is as old as criticism itself. Dating from 1948 to the present, Nigeria has experienced different historical landmarks such as:

- Colonialism (1861-1960)
- Independence (1960)
- Civil War (1967-1970)
- First Military Regime (1970-1979)
- Second Republic (1979-1983)

These epochs have generated varying political consequences, educational practices, economic tendencies, cultural crises and social dynamics that negatively affected written drama, leading to its poor reception. The aspects of play texts mostly affected are plot, characterization, subject matter, and style. They include sociological, historical and biographical contents. Also affected are the means of publication and distribution of written plays. Attempt is made in this chapter, to examine these historical developments, with a view to suggesting remedies for the betterment of the present and future theatre generations.

5.1 British Colonialism, Cultural Relegation, and Literary Imperialism

An elucidating point of departure for discussion of the effect of colonialism is Terry Eagleton’s view that we are in a world – meaning the third world, including Nigeria – in which the economy is “left stagnant and lopsided by
generations of colonial exploitation” which constrains the country to remain “in
fee to Western capitalism through their crippling repayments of debts …” (qtd in
Ogunjimi 85). Other writers have indicted colonialism in various ways. Oyin
Ogunba states that colonialism engendered “the lost dignity of the individual” and
“an erstwhile battered culture” of Nigeria (X). Colonialism led to the
psychological devastation of the individual, imposing the feeling of inferiority on
him. In other words colonialism encouraged the attitude of low self esteem in the
individual, leading him to believe that European ways of living were the ideal
models of culture, art, literature and other fields of human endeavour.

Chinweizu, Onwunchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike are of the
view that colonialism led to an “imperialist education which has tried to equip us
with all manner of absurd views and reactions to our past” (256). Colonial
education fed Nigerians with fallacious assumptions about their past, especially in
the areas of religion, culture and history which were veritable sources of art and
literary drama. Nigerians unfortunately beheld their past with ignominy, feeling of
regret, if not the fear of sanction by colonial authorities. G.G Darah sums it up by
maintaining that,

This state of cultural depression is a consequence of the conquest of
Nigeria by British colonialism in collaboration with Christian and
Islamic religions. The dominant and the most devastating force
was, of course, the subordination of Nigerian economic interests to
that of imperial Britain. The consequent devaluation of indigenous
cultures and the imposition of colonial ideological hegemony took
some time to accomplish. The creation of an educated elite was part
of this programme of cultural disorientation. The elite is credited with the inauguration of a written tradition of literature which colonialist criticism erroneously takes as the genesis of literature in Nigeria (1).

Here, Darah corroborates Eagleton’s points about the retrogressive colonial effects on Nigeria’s economy, and the earlier mentioned statements on cultural relegation. He, however, raises sensitive issues about the ideological enslavement of Nigerians to Britain, which promoted elitism among the educated class of the populace. This development, not only signaled an ideological divide between the elites and the masses, where the former, being loyal to colonial attitudes of life, and empowered financially, formed the nucleus of the oppressive capitalists of the Nigerian brand.

This colonial impact, with others enumerated earlier, had far reaching negative effects on Nigerian orature and literature, part of which the focus in this study is literary drama. How then did the negative effects of colonialism on culture, human personality, education, economic interest, socio-ideological praxis and political practice, reflect on play texts, predisposing a large percentage of them to negative or poor reception? G.G Darah attempted to provide an answer to this. According to him, because western names were adopted by the elites in preference to those of Africans, while the language of Shakespeare was revered; and owing to the fact that western drama texts like the works of Homer, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Dante and Tennyson featured in dramatic, concerts during the ‘Victorian Lagos’, quite expectedly, the little creative writing done then was a poor imitation of European models (2). Unfortunately, these elitist attitudes
continued to determine the directions of literary writing and criticism including written drama. Even when, in 1948, the University College, Ibadan commenced, its academic pursuits were European in outlook.

Bearing the above facts about poor imitation of European models in mind and considering the dramaturgical shortfalls of language, characterization, and dramatic techniques of early Nigerian plays reinforced by playwrights’ holistic adoption of European dramatic techniques, Oyin Ogunba avers that Soyinka’s early plays written under the colonial hegemony, were “sketches”. Exemplifying this observation with Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel*, Ogunba notes that the play is “hardly substantial enough to rank as one of his major achievements” (2). Commenting on these colonial induced dramaturgical defects, Ossie Enekwe observes:

> Our major modern dramatists – notably Wole Soyinka and J.P Clark – have failed to create authentic Nigerian dramas (that can inspire high reception) despite their expressions of concern for the preservation of our indigenous culture. Although Soyinka has introduced song, dance and other traditional elements into his plays, his dramaturgy remains rooted in the English stage where he served his apprenticeship. His rhapsodic flights, usually festooned with abstract Western ideas, are as incongruous as the syntax he often draws from Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas. Soyinka’s plays are full of intellectual energy, but stultified by his inability to write clear and appropriate dialogue (62-63).
Poor style and linguistic technique form the main butt of this criticism, which attributes Soyinka’s failure to his romance with colonial practice. This attack ranks among other critiques on the plots and subject matters of the colonial rooted Nigerian plays. The most obvious examples were plays that adapted European, American and Classical Greek plots and themes—thereby—falling into the deep pit of contextual incongruities, cultural contradictions and transpositional fallacies. Although the playwrights embarked on the adaptations to fill the vacuum existing for literary drama, during the colonial and early Independence periods, to the credit of playwrights, plays like J.P Clark’s *Song of a Goat*, which some critics regard as following the Greek tragic model, Wole Soyinka’s *The Becchae of Euripides*, adapted from Euripides’ *The Becchae*, Dapo Adelugba’s *The Scoundrel Suberu* (unpublished), Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to Blame*, adapted from Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, still bore stamps of their colonial roots, which were not agreeable to the sensibilities of African readers. According to Abiodun Adetugbo:

… Clark chooses Greek tragedy as a model (for adaptation of his play *Song of a Goat*). The defects of the model are also carried over … The characters do not come to life …. Secondly the convention of such a model warrants the use of stylized free verse which in Clark’s treatment outrages dialogue conventions in the medium of English: the characters speak out of charater …. Another point here is that because of the formal nature of the verse used, the dialogues are far removed from everyday speech. Many other seeming defects in Clark’s plays may be mentioned, but they are in a different
category from the ones already cited: for thinness of characterization and formalized language are weaknesses not of Clark as a playwright but of the model he has chosen … (189-190).

This reaction is a succinct exposition of Clark’s faithfulness to colonial standards which has earned his work the ugly critical remarks. Adetugbo further interrogates Clark’s approach to the theme of *Song of a Goat* and finds ample reasons to indict the playwright. Asking whether the theme of *Song of a Goat* is “treated convincingly as the subject of “epic tragedies”, he responds: “I still have some doubts in my mind about this, for one would find it difficult to believe that late impotence would culminate in the death of two brothers in *Song of a Goat*”(190). Hence, Clark’s adaptation of this colonial model creates aesthetic and contextual problems that have considerably attenuated favourable reception. Similar pitfalls, as demonstrated so far in Soyinka’s techniques and Clark’s transpositional choices will suffice to buttress the havoc wrecked on Nigeria’s literary drama that is aesthetically rooted in colonial models, including the adapted plays. This attitude denied the colonial era, of writings that valued cultural artifacts. Potential writers were intimidated by colonial hegemonic forces from attempting to raise issues against historical misconceptions, therefore, the only attempt by a playwright – Ene Henshaw – who was a medical practitioner was far from a deliberate quest to put history in proper perspective, and his play *This is Our Chance* ran short of dramatic sublimity.

The imperialist economy made book publishing financially unaffordable to potential writers. It became largely unthinkable for African writers to transcend the writing of mere sketches of plays. Dramatists like Hubert Ogunde (despite his
Bayo Ogunjimi in his writing: “Literature and National Development”, enunciates:

It is inevitable to locate national literatures in Africa in the time past, time present and time future. The artist depicts the uneven and lopsided structures of international and national economies, race and class dichotomies, the ideological upsurge and upheavals in the continent, the incessant polarized religious, ethnic and tribal disorders and the cataclysm engendered by the fallacies of the so called new democracies. Mongo Beti defines the great writer as that who can pose questions and identify the chains that really bind him, and who obstructs life and by what means (86).

This assigned role of the writer was elusive to the Nigerian playwrights of the colonial generation, and even, to some extent, beyond the imperialist governance. The reason lies in the fact that the playwrights of pre-independence reflected their enslavement to colonial hegemony, rather than confronting its dehumanizing impact. Again, even after independence had been achieved, and the drama of “national consciousness” attempted to replace that of colonial ‘complex’, the quest for cultural retrieval jeopardized aesthetic excellence in post-colonial writing. It seemed to be only from the decades following independence that the above vision described by Ogunjimi and Mongo Beti started to emerge fully.
From the foregoing survey, it becomes obvious that due to the aesthetic, sociological, historical and economic loopholes created in Nigerian playwriting by colonialism between the periods 1948 and 1960, as well as the scarcity of published plays within this period, owing to the hegemonic and discouraging dynamics of the colonial epoch, reception was drastically at low ebb. Readings of colonial texts - plays written and published within the period of colonialism, and play adaptations that were published or unpublished – have so far resulted in more negative reception than positive appraisal.

5.2 Nigerian Independence, Cultural Retrieval and Artistic Freedom

The question of whether Nigeria’s political Independence in 1960 was an antecedent of poor reception is ironical. How can a heroic, historically significant phenomenon of this magnitude be interrogated as a fore-runner and a cause of negative appraisal of drama? If Independence bestows on the country, the internal supremacy “over its territory and at the same time”, the freedom “from the control of any other state or authority …” (Adigwe 3), it should rather be investigated for positive, than negative effects. In the Nigerian situation, within the positivity of Independence, lurked certain negative forces that predisposed literary drama largely to critical disapproval. Obviously, it is a great fit for a people to attain political freedom, become more politically aware and move education in a pragmatic forward march. From this stage of the discussion, attempt is made to demonstrate how these positive dividends of political sovereignty, freedom, greater political awareness and increase in the number of universities within the first decade of post-colonialism – generated contradictory forces that led Nigerian Literary Theatre to be largely poorly received.
Freedom of expression and freedom from colonial circumscription, provided impetus for historical, cultural and sociological explorations that spelt doom for the aesthetic quality of many play scripts, leading to a high degree of negative critical reception. Precisely, the post colonial commitment of writers towards cultural retrieval, historical representation of heroic past and correction of its colonial misrepresentations, as well as reassertion of the Nigerian persons’ dignity, led the first generation playwrights, notably Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark, to pay greater attention to these cultural, sociological, historical and cosmological interests than the efficacy of their methods of crafting their plays and articulating their subject matters. According to A. Bodurin “In literature, content and expression determine each other so fundamentally that the validity and authenticity of a work suffers as soon as the native content is expressed in a foreign language” (qtd in Clark 124). This remark is cited in this discussion, not to exhume a resting issue of language debate pushed by Obi Wali and his supporters, but to argue in support of Achebe that a writer needs to “push back” the complexities of conventional English (or whichever foreign language he is using to carry his work) in order to ‘accommodate’ and make his idea clearer (160).

The concern for expression was not the only aesthetic aspect jettisoned by the above writers. The quality of alien plays they chose for transposition, the quintessence of plot and dramaturgical adroitness were also made to groan under the heavy load of dramatic context. The issue of concern here is that the freedom bestowed by independence gave playwrights the impetus to explore any area of their inclination without fear of checks and balances by an oppressive foreign authority, but this liberty was exercised largely at the expense of aesthetic
proficiency. In Nigeria, following Independence, playwrights won a broad space for dramatic expression. Unfortunately, this freedom of expression and exploration tilted playwriting toward antithetical ends with aesthetic demands, thereby incurring a high degree of negative critical judgment for plays that came to limelight between 1959 and 1967. The tendency of some critics to see only the praiseworthy aspects of the texts was a strong indication of post colonial sentiment towards the achievements made by Africans who were seen as ‘tabula rasa’ in humanistic endeavours. But an objective study was too apt to spot serious weakpoints. Writers were therefore adept in raising contextual issues meant to foster indigenous interests that were hitherto submerged, but their linguistic flights, literary adaptations, dramatic plots or absence of this, their stylistic approaches to the subjects, created lapses that invited negative valuation.

J.P Clark was a reputable dramatist. His plays such as *Song of a Goat*, *The Masquerade*, *The Raft* and *Ozidi* are notable literary achievements that are firmly planted in Nigeria repertory. *Song of a Goat* (1962) is “a verse tragedy about a man’s sexual importence and the passions aroused by his wife’s adultery with his brother”, while *Ozidi* (1966) is “an epic work”, “a revenge tragedy”, the plot of which “turns around the story of a child brought up by his grand mother, Oraeme, the witch in order to avenge his father, an aspirant to the throne who was treacherously killed by his clansmen …” (Nkosi 186). *The Masquerade* dramatizes a well known African folklore about a girl who rejects all local suitors until she falls victim to the borrowed charms of the stranger who turns out to be a demon” (Izevbaye 168).
These plays are therefore significant in their thematic options. But the playwrights’ dramaturgical and aesthetic lapses in articulating the themes undermined their esteem. Lewis Nkosi observes that Clark “has been criticized for his inability to create dramatic action”, while both *The Masquerade* and *The Raft* “are rather static as theatre”. Concerning *Song of a Goat*, Nkosi opines that “despite its occasional echoes of Elizabethan blank verse and Greek Classical tragedy”, the play “is a real achievement” (186). The two ugly remarks made about this play here readily contradict the ‘sympathetic’ reference to it as a “real achievement”. If the play is faulted as theatre, the explanation is that it is full of staging loopholes; after all, Clark is often described as better in poetry than in dramatic literature. Moreover, Clark’s obsession for poetic diction in these works denies them of the necessary local color that would have helped the reception.

In spite of the plaudits given to *Ozidi* with regard to Clark’s handling of the play’s larger scenes, Nkosi notes that the play has aesthetic lapses: there are lapses, of course; the use of English Slang words like ‘thug’ and ‘sucker’ in a traditional drama has a far reaching effect … (186). Continuing, he states:

Though in this play Clark has given himself greater freedom than in any of his previous works, the freedom has been at the expense of a tighter unity and economy, the absence of which risks a considerable diffusion of energy … (the play, *Ozidi* seems in the end a very loose and rambling play) (187).

In respect of Soyinka, Oyin Ogunba notes a similar Independence rooted freedom to explore deeply, sociological, traditional and historical issues which, in part, contributed to the collective conceptualization of his early works as “The
Movement of Transition” (1975). A reading of Soyinka’s plays like Swamp Dwellers, The Lion and the Jewel, Trials of Brother Jero, A Dance of the Forests, The Strong Breed, The Road, Kongi’s Harvest and Madmen and Specialists, reveals this common theme of ‘tradition’, ‘transition’ and what Ogunba describes as the playwright’s concern ‘with matters of great consequence for the life and health of his community” (3).

In A Dance of the Forests, for instance, Soyinka points at the need to look critically at the past history of the newly independent nation, in order to warn people against being lured by the promises of the new era, into jeopardizing the future. The Swamp Dwellers portrays the problems of a traditional society that is passing through the contradictions of a transitional period, while The Lion and the Jewel points at the victory of the traditional age over modernity in a struggle between the two socio-historical epochs. But this theme of victory is food for thought over the rationale of making ‘tradition’ triumph over the ‘progressive’. Trials of Brother Jero is a satiric note against the prevalence of false prophets in the society, and becomes a condemnation for all kinds of falsehood, nicknamed ‘419’ in contemporary Nigerian jargon. The Strong Breed reflects on the concept of ‘carrier’ or ‘scape goat’ in some traditional African societies, and this refers to an individual who is destined to carry away the evils in his community, as purgation.

This summary of Soyinka’s thematic and philosophical concerns shows the extent to which he was inspired by ‘freedom’, and his commitment towards putting in perspective, the true situation of Nigerian society in a transitional era. But the question is whether he succeeds in articulating all this through his
dramaturgical and aesthetic approaches. This is where the lacuna in his art dwells mostly. It is tenable to argue that he did not balance his great effort to raise sensitive issues of Nigerian concern with a conscious attempt to communicate them to a greater percentage of Nigerian readers.

Another consequence of Independence was the freedom of universities or commercial groups like the Mbari Company in Ibadan to engage in commercial publishing of plays, critical works, journals, magazines, newspapers, theses, dissertations, reviews and “belle-letters”, which provided opportunities for critics to get their appraisal of texts published. Dapo Adelugba points out that,

Growing side by side with the published and mounted dramas and theatrical productions during the 1960-1966 era was a vital, conscientious and responsible criticism – critical works in book form, articles in learned journals and in popular magazines and newspapers, theses, dissertations, reviews and belles-letters, a full and detailed study of which would be revealing (66-67).

It is not doubtful whether these commercial publications impacted on written drama in such a way as to make it largely poorly received, due to the simple logic that they exposed the minutest aesthetic and non-aesthetic defects of the plays and created greater awareness for more readers to learn how to react negatively to the minutest lapses in a text. This impact factor of critical publications on written plays is akin to the effect of Nigerian universities that increased in number in the 1960s. These academic institutions, in addition to establishing publishing companies, notably, the Ibadan University Press,
developed critical strategies that helped to expose the lapses in published plays. For instance, the institutions taught courses on literary criticism, and conducted appraisals which included critical receptions of published plays. The more critically aware that Nigerian readers became the more easily were textual lapses discovered and disapproved. By the 1960s, such lapses were numerous but tended to be glossed over due to the anxiety to over celebrate Independence, and because criticism was still in its nascent stage in Nigeria.

The new universities that were created in the first decade of post colonial era in Nigeria, were,

- University of Nigeria, Nsukka (October, 1960)
- Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (1962)
- University of Ife (1962)

Some of the popular publications apart from plays written by the first generation writers – were *Nigeria Magazine*, published by the Federal Ministry of Information, and *Ibadan*, published by the University College, Ibadan. And these were as Adelugba maintains, “the most frequented magazines by critics and scholars of the drama/theatre of the period” (67). The journals called *Black Orpheus* and *Theatre Express* also emerged.

A look at some of the negative remarks made about some play texts and literary drama generally in these publications can serve as indexes of their poor reception. The *Black Orpheus* of March, 1966, Number 19, page 33 to 39 carries Martin Esslin’s criticism titled “Two African Playwrights” in which he appraises Wole Soyinka’s five plays – *The Trials of Brother Jero, The Strong Breed, A Dance of the Forests, The Swamp Dwellers, The Lion and The Jewel*; and J.P.
Clark’s three plays – *The Masquerade, Song of a Goat, and The Raft*. Here, Esslin throws light on the lapses of language and style of the playwrights. He exposes J.P. Clark’s failure in trying “something in the nature of a cycle of plays on the working out of a family course, no less than a Nigeria oresteia”. He describes it as “an ambitious undertaking” in which Clark “nearly succeeds”, but could not do so completely. He therefore described *Song of a Goat* as “not quite convincing”.

Continuing, Esslin opines: “the motivation of the tragedy is too simple and unoriginal to support the weight of full scale tragedy across the generations” (37). Concerning *The Raft*, Esslin, concludes that the play is “crushed under the load of its poetic objective” (38).

Una Maclean in *Black Orpheus*, had this to say about Wole Soyinka’s writings,

> The Nigerian content of the play can, paradoxically, confuse those very Nigerian critics who might be expected to see beyond them to the underlying meaning. This actually occurred at the time when *A Dance of the Forest* was first performed and the author was upbraided for his lavish and confusing pagan themes, scarcely suitable, it was implied, for respectable modern drama (51).

This comment argues in favour of the earlier view in this work that the use of tribal or ethnic myths and artifacts, no matter their universal handlings in plays, can only be highly received by people deeply versed in the tradition being represented. And this weakness is an obvious lacuna in Soyinka’s early plays.
The *Nigeria Magazine* of March 1962, carries a review of *Song of a Goat* by J.P. Clark, *Trials of Brother Jero* by Wole Soyinka. The review was done by Nkem Nwankwo, who opines that:

*Song of a Goat* showed cracks. The opening for instance was the weakest part of the play. We are told about the theme of the play instead of being shown it …. As many critics have remarked, the structure of *Song of a Goat* is derived from Greek tragedy. The action is static most of the time … (80).

*Nigeria Magazine* of June 1966, carries an important article by J.P Clark, on “Some Aspects of Nigerian Drama” (118). There are other important articles that reveal numerous shortcomings of plays and the prospects of correcting them.

The Independence also brought with it, greater political consciousness, especially among the Nigerian elites. The desire by different ethnic groups in the country to assert their rights and possibly dominate other tribes, created tribal consciousness, rather than loyalty to the country. This tribalism gave rise to literary sentiments that brought plays to harsh judgment. Tribal artifacts were employed in plays indiscriminately as if they had universal appeal and were easily communicable to people from other tribes and beyond. Soyinka, for instance, is often acknowledged for employing the concepts of Yoruba cosmology in his plays and in recognition of this, Alain Ricard Maintains:

For Wole Soyinka, perhaps more than for Chinua Achebe, the question of the place of the tribal element in his work raises its head with great acuity. The theatre offers more possibilities of using tribal cultural elements than the novel form; we know that Yoruba
dances and songs fill all the work of Wole Soyinka (*The Road, Kongi’s Harvest, The Lion* and *the Jewel*). Will these make him a ‘tribal’ writer, locked up in his cultural heritage? (157).

Ricard further asks, “How do we interpret his frequent references to Yoruba culture?” (157). In reacting to his use of Yoruba dances, songs, and mythology in a play like *A Dance of the Forests*, a scholar like Akanji Nasiru, opines that Soyinka:

… creates his own gods and fashions his own myths and thus satisfies his own intellectual (or academic) preoccupations without seeming to care that he sings his own song all alone” (qtd in Musa 47).

This comment is to say the least, devastating to the art of Soyinka, but how valid is it? The validity may be sought in the fact that only Soyinka and people versed in the Yoruba culture can fully appreciate the traditional idioms that gave form to his interpretations. Concerning Ola Rotimi, tribal writing can also be identified in his works like *The Gods are Not to Blame*, where a Greek mythology is superimposed on Yoruba cosmology. The myth of Yoruba pantheon predominates in the action of the play. Even in Rotimi’s historical plays like *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen*, the historical heroes of Yoruba and Benin tribes respectively are portrayed.

This attitude to writing attracted poor reception from scholars who attributed their negative attitudes to many factors: problem of easy communication with readers from other tribes or foreign countries. Moreover, it only served the developmental concerns of the ethnic groups that own the culture employed,
hence it did not promote unity in the nation. In reaction against such writings, Funsho Aina, declares that “Nigeria, as in the political and economic spheres cannot be said to have fully utilized its artistic potentials since Independence, 40 years ago” (qtd in Musa 49). The reason for this opinion, according to Aina, is “a misdirection of aesthetic values”, which therefore suggests that there should be a gradual movement from ethnic identity to national identity, which in turn must give birth to international or global identity in artistic works (49). Also against this background, it has been argued that “tribal myths should be discouraged” in plays because,

Their abstract nature and limitation to a particular ethnic group and tribe, inhibit their universal or national comprehension. Thus, people’s understanding of them would entail being familiar with the cultural milieu or terrain where these myths are picked (Enna and Anyagu 88).

If the freedom from colonial ‘circumscription’ encouraged Soyinka to use art freely, loading it with sociological, historical and metaphysical concerns, at the expense of linguistic clarity, and if his close use of tribal elements, tended to betray him as an ethnocentric writer during the first decade of Nigeria’s Independence, it is understandable. But, can Rotimi also be described as a tribal writer to the extent of his exploiting – in his early plays – tribal histories of the Yoruba and Benin, or will Clark be seen as such in the light of his use of Ijo folk legend of the house of Ozidi, often told and performed as a common play or story telling performance? (Okagbue 162). Rotimi and Clark have also been censured as tribal writers, hence, critics of their tribal or ethnocentric plays appear correct in
recommending that they should mix their ethnic materials with modern national issues, events, heroic names and themes, and articulate them in the brand of English language that will be clear and easy to comprehend. The playwrights’ failure to heed this can sustain the above poor perceptions.

5.3 The Literary Hiatus of Nigerian Civil War

The next important historical epoch that led to poor perception of literary drama was the Nigerian Civil War. Dapo Adelugba claims that “if there was a decrease in theatrical activity in the civil war years 1967-1970, there was continued productivity among the dramatists both of English language and the indigenous languages expression, and their plays were published with no less regularity than in the pre-war years” (69). But it is difficult to agree with Adelugba on this claim, for he fails to mention any example of such publications. If dramatists like “Ola Rotimi, Umaru Ladan, Wale Ogunyemi, Bode Sowande, Meki Nzewi and later, Zulu Sofola, Akanji Nasiru and Segun Oyekunle” as Adelugba counted them were writing during the war, they “were not to become well known until 1970s when they came into the theatrical limelight” (69) and were received contemporaneously with the playwrights of the military era. Hence, reception during the war was rather non existent.

Furthermore, based on the theory of reader-response criticism, that texts come into existence only when they have been read and given interpretation, it can be argued that there were no drama texts written during the war because there is scarcity or no critical evidence to showcase their existence. It is hard to locate critical readings of civil war drama texts that are acknowledged as such. It may however be argued that the war texts were received in the decade following the
war, and were only slantly associated with the civil crisis. A disputable example has been Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to Blame* which is sometimes cited as representing the world powers as ‘The Gods’ who should not be indicted for the calamity of Nigerian civil war, which Nigeria brought on herself.

Ndubuisi Nnanna, in his essay on “The Nigeria Civil War in Modern Drama: Selective Amnesia or Wisdom of the Ostrich”, suggests that there is an “apparent neglect of one of the most important events in the history of Nigeria, the civil war, in the drama (written in English) of modern Nigeria”, and argues that “there seems to be no reasons at all for this neglect, considering that the same war is the topic of several other literary genres in Nigeria” (144). He therefore concludes that “Nigerian playwrights should realize the futility in selecting which experiences of the nation to remember and which to forget” (150).

Adelugba’s claim above, that there were drama texts published during the war, without mentioning any of them, and Ndubuisi’s strong attestation to lack of publications on the historical landmark, are both vindications that reception of literary drama fell to the lowest ebb within the period 1967 to 1969 and perhaps after. One may even ask, do we receive plays that do not exist? It may be tenable to argue that there was no reception during the war. Hence, the war caused low ebb of reception.

5.4 Military Despotism: Antecedent and Motif for Defective Dramaturgy

The military era in Nigeria began after the civil war which lasted from 1967 to 1970, with General Yakubu Gowon as the head of state. The era was marked by ugly political, social and economic developments. Politically, military regime was either “the benevolent meritocracy or the absolute dictatorship both of
which are defined by their divergence from democracy” (Akinwale 37). During the military era which spanned the periods immediately after the war, till 1979, and interspersed different civilian regimes that reigned during the periods 1979 to 1983, and during the period 1999 till date, political leadership was in the hands of the military who made government appointments, sparsely and undemocratically involving some civilians.

Both Francis Adigwe and Ayo Akinwale present clarifying pictures of the ugliness of military government with regard to its socio-economic consequence in Nigeria. Although the military often claimed to usurp office in order to maintain peace and order, eradicate corrupt practices and set the nation on the road to development, Adigwe notes that,

The battle against corruption has not been won. III-gotten gains were not seized from the politicians and the air is still full of charges and allegations about corruption in high places. The battle for a more just and equal society is not getting off the ground. The gap between the rich and the poor is becoming larger every day. In fact, there now seems to be a growing tendency for the rich to live together in their own area, send their children to special schools and in one way or another live a different style of life from the poor. This marks the beginning of a class system in Nigeria (275).

This accusation applies equally to both the military and the civilians. The military were considered to be as corrupt and power-hungry as politicians. While the military ruled, they constituted themselves into an oppressive bourgeois class, and were often very reluctant to relinquish power to elected civilian government. 
The military regime of General Yakubu Gowon was noted for indecision, ostentatious living, and mismanagement of public funds. Some of the corrupt practices of Gowon’s regime were transferred to subsequent military leaders who even developed their own peculiar sociological atrocities against the masses. Ayo Akinwale points out that General Sani Abacha’s leadership was a “maximum rule”. He notes further, that Abacha’s regime “was characterized by absolute dictatorship, killing of perceived opponents, embezzlement of public funds, profligate looting of the treasury and the like” (38). The question now is, how did these sociopolitical manifestations of the military epoch affect written plays to dictate their poor reception? Akinwale explains:

During this period … Nigerian theatre was always alive to its responsibility as far as the nation’s political issues were concerned. It condemned policies that were obnoxious to the people … The military era gave rise to a lot of plays that condemned military rule in its entirety. For instance, Soyinka’s *A Play of Giants* (1989) was very firm that dictators all over Africa will soon fall …. Osofisan in his *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1978) states clearly that the greed of our political leaders, especially the looting spree of soldiers … will do nothing else but manufacture more robbers for the society (38).

Obviously, the nature of theatre described above was the radical or revolutionary type. Hence, the military regime turned the Nigerian literary dramatists into revolutionary writers whose leading activists (as already enunciated in this work) were well known. Their works which have also been exemplified here, have been described as being in the mould of Marxism, which
employed the aesthetics of the Brechtian epic theatre. These features of the radical drama have been underscored in this work as epitomes of poorly articulated plot, characterization and themes. They have also been negatively appraised as preaching a wrong ideology of Marxist socialism, which is utopian for Nigeria. These ideological and aesthetic lapses dictated the poor reception of written drama that was inspired by the military and political oppressive regimes of Nigeria.

5.5 Pluralism of Tertiary Institutions and Publishing Houses, Rise of Home Video, and Mediocrity in Theatre Practice

During the decades 1990 to 2010, despite tangible efforts by dramatists to fill the lapses of previous decades, many historical forces can be identified which are already threatening to engender poor reception for plays. These include the pluralism of academic institutions which has fostered a self-publishing syndrome among staff who are in dire need of academic and job promotions; the mushroom growth of publishing houses which are incompetent in quality determination for books; rapid decline in standard of education, and dearth of talented dramatists; rapid influx of theatre mediocres into the playwriting practice, the explosion of home-movies scripts which misguide budding stage writers, and above all, economic depression and crass materialism which caused publishers to publish only for profit and, consequently only books that could make the reading lists of schools.

In the era between 1990 and 2010, there is an obvious pluralism of tertiary institutions in Nigeria, culminating in a picture of more than 117 universities, many polytechnics, colleges of education and schools of technology. In each of these institutions, one of the major criteria for a rise in academic positions is the
number of good quality publications a lecturer has been able to produce in form of journal articles, conference papers, main-line books and other materials considered relevant by the appraisal arm, and approved by the highest ruling body of the institution. Play texts constitute one of the publications considered for appraisal in the Departments of Theatre Arts and English Studies – both of which bear diverse interesting names in different institutions. The inclusion of play texts among the above materials and the desire of academic staff to move progressively in their career, motivate a proliferation of play writing among staff. Consequently, many writers do not engage in the art because they are well talented for the job or even interested in it, but to quality for academic promotion. A good number of plays written by these writers do not measure up to the standard required for good scores due to their numerous lapses, which encouraged by ‘self-publishing’, push the publications into low esteem.

The need to publish for the purpose of academic promotion is compounded by the tendency of some academic staff in the two departments mentioned above, to write plays hurriedly for sale to students during lectures. And this in turn leads to ‘self publishing’ because many top quality publishers would ‘reject’ the scripts as poor in quality just as the assessment committee set up in the institutions to evaluate lecture materials could do. The pertinent question now is, what are the lapses found in the play texts written in the institutions that attract critical condemnation? Usually, to establish the quality or esteem of any given play, the assessor or the reader – the critic – asks some basic questions after going through the script. The first is a general question – is this good drama or not? Definitely, on a general note, as H.D. Albright and others imply in their book *Principles of
Theatre Art, a peace of drama that lacks the elements of ‘plot conflicts’, ‘Dilemma’, ‘Irony’, ‘Suspense’, and ‘surprise’ (22-27) will be so undramatic and unexciting that they may discourage the assessor from going further to read the text in search of its structural, formal and contextual features. But if he picks courage and dares, he asks other questions: what kind of play has the author written? What is his focus or subject matter? What are the dramatic qualities of his dialogue, choice of words and language generally? How does the playwright effect characterization?

According to George Taylor, “good theatre” can be differentiated from the “merely theatrical”. “Good theatre” is written when the dramatic effect is inherent in the writing but to be theatrical is to use the tricks of the stage in order to make the effect dramatic” (14). A play may just be theatrical when it is written to show its physical features of dialogue, characters, and story line, but lacks the sublime depth of plot, characterization, theme, style or language and the standard qualities of these features as enunciated through literary theories and long periods of practice.

Considering the question, what kind of play has the author written? Ahmed Yerima in apparent answer to this question states that,

Three major kinds of plays are presently dominant among African playwrights or specifically, Nigerian playwrights. These are tragedy, comedy and satire. Other types of plays such as the absurdist plays, tragic-comedy and melodrama, exist as specialized forms and are used by particular playwrights to achieve particular stage effects or dramatic themes (45).
Yerima points out where, in these aspects of drama, the playwright creates lapses in his play: his failure to be definite about the genre he has fitted his work into. The playwright may fail to be clear about the conventional developments of tragedy, comedy, satire over the ages and how older playwrights had applied these acquired conventions. Examples, when the features of classical Greek tragedy as enunciated by Aristotle, are carelessly mixed with the Shakespearean, and modern tragedies developed by author miller or Wole Soyinka in his ‘ritual tragedy’, the play becomes confusing and poorly esteemed. When the playwright specifically employs a definite generic approach, the reader becomes concerned with how well this has been done, to bring out the necessary dramatic effects of pity, sorrow and fear (in view of tragedy), comic elements of humour and happiness (in comedy).

With respect to theme, a play is dismissed as being without focus if it has no deliberate idea to portray. “If an author boasted to me that he had written his story without having thought over its purpose before hand, simply under inspiration, I would call him a madman” (Chekov, quoted in Yerima 68). The play, sometimes may have a focus, but such a focus is ‘static’, emanating from a static point of view. For example, the theme of H.I.V. virus disease is broad, artistically and socio-educationally more dynamic than the subject of personal or local dimension. Soyinka’s sociopolitical themes in his plays such as Kongi’s Harvest, Opera Wonyosi and King Baabu, are more profound and dynamic than the subject focused by his The Lion and the Jewel.

The nature of characterization in a play also determines its quality. The assessor searches for the theoretically enunciated qualities of dramatic character
which obviously foregrounds good characterization: goodness, propriety and consistency (Aristotle, cited by Dukore). When a play depicts characters that are not true to life or familiar with the target readers, then it is a cause for critical condemnation. This is even worse when the character is painted as too good or worse than a normal human being. Superhuman beings are often doubtful to readers. Yerima exemplifies this lapse in characterization as follows:

A simple example is when the new playwright attempts to create characters who are super humans, like in the old John Wayne films, or characters who are excessively good, like Adam Bede in Jane Austin’s novel of the same title. In such a case, the superhero character stands out of the play, becoming cumbersome for even the actor to understand … (91).

The dramatic qualities of dialogue, language and choice of words are also investigated by the assessor, who raises questions about clarity of expression, use of words, flow and mode of dialogue, the approach to foreign language (English or French), use of imagery and figures of speech, use of proverbs and idioms; syntax. Soyinka’s language is described as ‘too sophisticated’ that it appears confusing to an average African or even Nigerian reader. But many plays use language so incompetently that they appear too simple, common place and technically substandard for high esteem. However, considering the interest of Nigerian audiences, plays that have no signs of ‘domesticated’ foreign language syntax and vocabulary, are received poorly. Ola Rotimi is a regular example of a playwright who in his plays The Gods are Not to Blame, Hopes of the Living
Dead, If … A Tragedy of the Ruled demonstrated his concern for Nigerian audiences, by using ‘Nigerian’ or pidgin English skillfully.

Plays that use words so lavishly that they become verbose have cause to be doubted as qualitative works. In view of dialogue, a play embodies a linguistic lapse if its use of dialogue is undramatic. On the contrary, in Emeka Nwabueze’s A Parliament of Vultures, the exchange between Parkers and Habamero demonstrates the playwright’s effective use of dialogue.

PARKERS: Question Mr. Chairman! Why was the information on a particular time sent to particular members?

HABAMERO: You’re asking me? Go and ask the typist.

PARKERS: The typist should be called to order

HABAMERO: Dr. Parkers if we have to call every one to order because of every little error, there will be no one left in the service of this nation. May we proceed? (28).

The above dramatic illustration portrays a tight exchange of speech that is devoid of unnecessary dragging of phrases or idiosyncratic manner of speech. It shows a unified sentence structure, set within a dramatic speech rhythm. These qualities are rare in ordinary conversational exchange of real life.

Because many playwrights lack skill or experience in these issues and the theoretical factors backing them, because they refuse or abhor reading older and better plays before they engage in playwriting, their works are critically rejected or poorly appraised. For example, Ahmed Yerima relays how some plays were once sent for publication by a young playwright and the publisher sent the scripts back with the following words of advice,
I regret to say that our assessors were not satisfied with your plays and I will like to advice that you read some of the plays of the established playwrights in Nigeria, such as Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark and Ola Rotimi. They are the yardstick, I am sorry, which the assessors used (148).

This quickly brings to mind the lacuna created in the quality of literary drama through the exploits of clandestine publishing companies. These lack necessary standard for proof-reading and assessing works of art for qualification to publish. Consequently, they print substandard plays, embodying most of the above lapses to the reading public. Referring to this kind of problem, Berth Lindfors recollects an ugly lapse in connection with Onitsha Market Chapbooks. According to Lindfors,

Another factor complicating analysis of these materials is the high incidence of printing errors. Some of the compositors who set type for Chapbook publishers have very little training or professional experience and less formal schooling than the authors themselves. They are apt to make several spelling mistakes on every page (110). Such mistakes still occur in many publications today and help to drag the standard and regard for such works to the mud.

Critics usually disapprove of substandard or self published scripts. Examples are avoided here for legal purposes. But there is significant evidence that for commercial motives, different kinds of short plays flood the market, searching for unfortunate readers, who, if not critical, will read ‘trash’.
The boom of home video or what may be called the satellite age has affected playwriting in two negative directions. First, the proliferation of film scripts among students and amateur film writers has misled budding stage writers into confusing the form, structure and techniques of the film script for stage text. Consequently, many plays written today do not belong to the stage but to the screen. For example, when a play is written with too many scenes, unpracticable actions and appears too imaginative, it can be critically turned down for the stage. Second, deep interest in quality plays has become a drudgery for many theatre practitioners, who, rather than composing and publishing standard and well written stage plays, divert their dramatic skills to putting together film scripts, and selling the manuscripts to publishers who are ever ready to buy at high prices.

Feminism is also a historical trend that is pushing substandard plays into the literary theatre scene, hence, the poor reception of feminist drama as a misnomer in the articulation of its aesthetic and sociological approaches. Aesthetically, John Adebayo Afolabi’s negative reactions against the dramaturgy of Oyedepo and Onyekuba – both feminist writers – demonstrate to a large extent, the kind of reception received by feminist drama from many critics, including Obafemi and others already mentioned in this work. According to Afolabi,

A close look at Oyedepo’s works, however, reveals that many of the plays lack basic rudiments of playwriting. These are technical elements, that heighten the quality of plays. The plot structures are often pedestrian and lacking in complication. A playwright does not write stories. He/she weaves the story in intricate patterns, step by
step from exposition to complication to denouement/resolution (133).

About Onyekuba, Afolabi also describes a number of problems. He notes that:

The plots of her plays are often pedestrian and simplistic. Actions are often over exaggerated beyond levels of verisimilitude or plausibility. She also publishes her plays with publishers that cannot promote her art to a national level … (133).

Most probably, this hint on publishers alludes to the aforementioned self-publishing syndrome of some Nigerian playwrights, which leads to poor standard and its concomitant poor reception.

5.6 Conclusion

This discussion has shown how the forces of colonialism, Independence, civil war, military era, and the post-revolutionary era contributed to the poor reception of written drama in Nigeria, dating from 1948 to 2010. Colonialism fertilized the ground for the influx of Western drama that had very little or no positive relevance to the linguistic, sociopolitical and aesthetic inclinations of Nigerians, hence it engendered poor reception from Nigerian readers. Independence served the remote effect of creating a favourable atmosphere of freedom, political awareness, postcolonial tendencies towards cultural retrieval, reassertion of individual dignity. These gains inspired greater attention to socio political as well as cultural themes of plays that threw valuable aesthetics overboard. They also led to tribal drama of English expression, and this culminated in poor reception. The civil war period did not manifest dramatic writing of note, hence whatever gains were made then, were received
contemporaneously with the products of the military era within the period 1970 to 1990.

The military period was marked by dictatorship and oppression, which, coupled with the tremulous experiences of the past war, encouraged a Marxist, socialist approach in dramatic writing, and gave impetus to the Brechtian epic theatre techniques. This revolutionary approach was also poorly received due to its ideology that was ‘utopian’ in Nigerian situation, and its aesthetics that manifested shortfalls in plot, characterization, language, and its failure to chart a realistic and practical course for revolution. The new radical period here also called the ‘home video era’ which is located between the years 1990 and 2010 is considered as a fruitful era that nevertheless, manifested anti-reception influences. These are the numerical pluralism of higher academic institutions which instigated the proliferation of poor quality plays by some teaching staff and amateur writers. During this period, spread of incompetent publishing companies, who had no high standard for publishable works, encouraged self publishing of plays. Feminism as a historical development in Nigeria led to feminist writing which was also defaulted in its method of articulating its ideology, as well as aesthetics.

So far, much has been articulated in the preceding discussions regarding the factors that largely generated poor valuation of some of play texts in Nigeria. In view of this, it becomes ripe to prescribe possible modalities for combating the causative factors.
CHAPTER SIX

6.0 REMEDIAL IMPERATIVES FOR IMPROVED RECEPTION

This work has attempted to lay bare the critical, theoretical, historical and textual factors that have combined to largely generate poor reception for literary theatre in Nigeria, during the period under study. In sum, the factors are reverence for colonial plays, poor adaptations of classical, English and American plays, European psychology among Nigerian writers and indiscriminate use of Western dramatic conventions by Nigerian writers. Apart from these colonialism bred forces, the Independence-rooted factors are post-colonial sentimentalism in playwriting, tribal writing, neocolonial education of playwrights and their continued preference for Western, dramatic conventions, absence of African psychology in playwriting.

The civil war created its own problems of reception by stifling the availability of play scripts on war activities. In the immediate post war, there were receptive problems, such as: wrong ideological embodiment of plays, poor articulation of radical aesthetics, out-growth of multiple educational theatre departments, without a corresponding supply of infrastructures – human and material; continued dominance of European theoretical framework for playwriting. By 1991, new remedial – but inadequate – forces had started to surface in terms of fresh approaches to radicalism, use of folktales, rituals in literary drama, but the problem still persisted.

These historical issues were compounded by critical flaws and aesthetic lapses of plays. The former manifested in form of textual readers’ (critics’) poor psychology of drama and the concomitant negative reception which engendered
the above denials of infrastructures to institutions. Other critical or reading problems are Eurocentric appraisal of African drama, absence of critical works on civil war theatre, over concentration or emphasis of post-colonial sensibility in criticism. Finally, there were also aesthetic problems that hindered positive reception, notable among which are poor articulation of plot, theme, characterization, language, and poor playwriting.

These issues and some of their solutions were enunciated in preceding chapters, but their remedies need further elucidation. Different approaches have been proposed here as remedial devices for the enhancement of reception. These are conceptualized and discussed as:

- Exoneration
- Adaptation
- Reparation
- Aesthetic enhancement.

### 6.1 Exoneration

Exoneration simply implies what the *New Webster’s Dictionary of English Language* calls “to free from blame, to release from a duty or obligation” (332). In this discourse, exoneration refers to the freedom of play readers from reading or attitudinal behaviours and thinking that can hinder good reception. Exoneration on the other hand, is achieved when Nigerian playwrights take a pragmatic decision to absolve themselves from revering exotic texts and remaining psychologically enslaved to European dramaturgy, though they should absolve themselves from old excessive, post colonial sentiments, which led the first generation writers to jettison aesthetic excellence in their plays. These examples were clearly
articulated in previous chapters. At any rate, post-colonial tendencies must be properly channeled

However, playwrights should endeavour to develop African psychology in their writing. Effort in this direction can be made by seeing drama, in the same light as African’s see their celebrative, significant performances, rather than an unserious affair. Indigenous performance approaches should be accorded a higher position in literary drama. The masquerade, folktale, ritual, mythology should be explored with greater vigour than they are currently being used in composition. Rather than encourage, European or neo-Aristotelian theories to dominate in their dramaturgy, Nigerian playwrights should allow theories derived from the above indigenous approaches to rule their sensibility.

In view of critical approaches, play readers should absolve themselves from their poor psychological temperament towards drama, so that they can be more favourably disposed to play texts. With better perception of drama, readers’ comments and their recommendations can push governments, corporate bodies, individuals to promote and patronize playwrights and give financial support to institutions offering drama. Consequently, good teachers and better infrastructures can be provided for training playwrights in the art of composing good plays.

6.2 Adaptation

According to *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, the term adaptation refers to “the recasting of a work in one genre to another (adaptation of a novel for the stage for instance)” – it is a Dramaturgical work based on the text to be staged. All imaginative textual manoeuvres are permissible: cuts, rearrangement of
narration, stylistic polishing, the use of fewer characters or locations, a dramatic focus on certain strong points of the novel, the addition of external texts, montage and collage of foreign elements, different endings and changes in the *Fabula* (plot) as required by the staging. Adaptation, unlike translation or contemporization, can be very free; it does not hesitate to change or even invert the meaning of the original play. To adapt is to entirely rewrite the text, using it as raw material. This practice has created a better awareness of the importance of the dramaturgy in a production. (14).

Adaptation is also in some senses, used for the translation of texts from one language to another. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* also enunciates this perspective of the term as follows:

The term ‘adaptation’ is often used in the sense of translation or a more or less faithful transposition, and it is not always easy to draw a line between the two. Adaptation here means a translation that adapts the source text to the new context of reception, making any additions or deletions that may be considered necessary to its reappraisal. Rereadings of classics – including abridged editions, new translations, the addition of other texts, new interpretation – are in themselves adaptations, as is the process of translating a foreign text and adapting it to the cultural and linguistic context of the target language. Most translations today are called adaptations, which corroborates the fact that any one of the range of operations
from translation to rewriting of a play is a recreation and that the
transfer of forms from one genre to another is never an ‘innocent’
process but involves the production of meaning (15).

Adaptation, according to Ahmed Yerima, is used in many different
contexts in drama …. For some people, adaptation suggests no more than one
playwright taking another playwright’s play and modifying it …. This definition
could be accepted, but adaptation in playwriting goes beyond that. There are
playwriting principles to be considered, there are rules and end results which
emerge as new drafts of the older plays (119).

The concept of adaptation is also considered to be a playwright’s attempt
to make ‘suitable’, plays already written, for new surroundings or audience, for a
greater appeal (Yerima 119). Adaptation in playwriting has many advantages: it
provides opportunities for lapses in plays that are already published, to be
removed in order to produce a fresh and more qualitative work. Not only that, it
adjusts exotic texts to suit local readers.

Adaptation allows a play to accommodate aesthetic elements that are
absent in it to make it more interesting and acceptable to its reader. Dramatic
adaptation can involve changing a novel to a drama script. It may involve altering
a novel or a play to fit into the demands of a social, economic, political or
religious event.

An already adapted play, like Rotimi’s The Gods are Not to Blame, may be
re-adapted if it is no longer meeting the demands of time and space of its readers
and audiences. Its re-adaptation may be necessary if it embodies aesthetic flaws
that were not obvious in the past, but have come to the fore through years of research and theoretical developments.

Adaptation and re-adaptation can be embarked upon in order to combat the bye-products of history that adversely affected reception in Nigeria. These bye-products are the colonial rooted Western drama which was rather repugnant to the average Nigerian’s inclination, and was adopted but not accepted.

Colonialism has currently been expunged in principle but its footprints still manifest in plays. Classical, English and American texts, which are still found in Nigerian libraries, not only in original forms but also in their adaptations are still available in large numbers. These texts should now be approached with a sensibility for more innovative adaptation and re-adaptation. These measures involve up-to-date adaptation of the texts to plant them within the Nigerian sociological, historical and cultural foundations.

For example, relevant themes like incest, selfless leadership, communal consciousness, can be extracted from Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, dramatized with the play’s elements of surprise, coincidence, discovery, filial crisis, and set within related indigenous artifacts such as ritual, folktale or mythology. Soyinka has tried to experiment on this, through his theory of ritual tragedy, but he does not succeed fully due to his ‘difficult’ language. To solve this, adaptations should be carried in a domesticated English language that is capable of reflecting the idioms and nuances of vernacular expression. Ola Rotimi succeeds in this linguistic approach with his *The Gods are Not to Blame*, but the universality that should manifest to reflect common Nigerian cultural elements is absent. This omission can be taken care of by choosing common features of language, philosophy and character.
Names of characters can be coined to belong to no particular tribe but to all or the major ones. Example, such names as the following may be coined and they cannot be identified with any tribe Ocheja, Uchegbo, Udegba, Adabu.

It is also remedial to update an adapted play like Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to Blame* which is now manifesting various lapses for Nigerian readers. These flaws include the play’s tribal inclination as well as its obvious use of Greek mythology and its adoption of the Greek concept of tragic hero. Its new adaptation should not be done on theme, philosophy, ideology and language alone. The Greek mythology about Oedipus should be substituted with a Nigerian myth that has a person of low status as hero who is at the centre of a cosmic disruption in which he suffers intensely.

When an African Mythology or folktale is used, Nigerian song, music and dance are imperative. Sam Ukala buttresses this fact in his view that in the folkist drama, song, music and dance are used “not only for the creation of mood and entertainment, and to comment on the action or plight of character, but also to advance the plot often involving leitmotif; simple but artistic diction; and didacticism” (qtd in Akpuda 34).

This picture of the new Nigerian adaptation describes the play with a Nigerian myth, folktale or ritual – serving as its plot. A subject matter that is relevant to the cultural, historical and sociological context of Nigeria, characters whose names are coined to echo the inflections of notable tribes in Nigeria and a tragic hero of low standing. These measures, if employed, will go far in solving the problem arising from what Ukala describes as the surrender of the African “to the aesthetics of his colonial masters” and his satisfaction with “hack and or
abridged translations, adaptations or reproductions of popular European plays, music and dance” (Ukala “politics” 455, qtd in Akpuda 36). This new adaptation will serve greatly in wiping any ideological illogicality that is transferred from the Greek story. For instance, the possibility of a child growing into a man of Odewale’s age to turn around to make children through his own mother who should have passed the age of fertility, is rare and improbable in the African sensibility. This weak logic is also spotted in J.P. Clark’s Song of a Goat, an adaptation of Greek tragedy, by Lewis Nkosi who wonders how in African setting, late impotence could lead to the death of two brothers.

6.3 Reparation

Reparation here implies the correction of historical misinterpretations of African past, engendered in play scripts through colonial psychology of Nigerian playwrights. The absence of authentic Nigerian history in dramatic writings was a biting problem of colonial era that cries for reparation. History keeps repeating itself, and if false historical representations continue as they were under colonial hegemony, sensitive readers will continue to disapprove them. A good example of this colonial falsehood in historical representation is found in the controversy generated between Ola Rotimi’s Ovonramwen … and Ahmed Yerima’s Trials of Ovonramwen. The former is viewed as lacking in authenticity of what actually happened in the Benin kingdom, while the latter is acclaimed to be a more accurate representation, which won the admiration of the people whose antecedents are being dramatized. Hence, such authenticated updating of historical material will correct the old, but false, colonial dramatizations, and ensure better reception.
It may be argued here that lack of authenticity of history is not a hindrance to creative dramatics – Aristotle differentiates history from drama – but in the face of post colonial African retrieval of her past, authenticity of history is a quintessence. Ola Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* has also been doubted as an authentic representation of the actual Yoruba king of that nomenclature. Under an authentic old Yoruba tradition, a leader of Kurunmi’s status should not have been characterized as a monogamist, as depicted in the play. Although drama is different from reality, ‘propriety’ is a significant imperative of Aristotle’s delineation of character, which is also relevant in any situation.

6.4 Aesthetic Enhancement

Aesthetic enhancement refers to the improvement of the artistic and dramaturgical essence of dramatic texts, in their elements of plot, theme, characterization, language, and music, in order to make them more positively appraised by readers. Problems generated by factors of Independence can be tackled mostly through aesthetic enhancement. These problems include Soyinka’s stylistic absurdities and obscurity arising from metaphysical and ritualistic complication of his drama; J.P Clark’s transposition of the aesthetics and ideological lapses from Western and Classical Greek dramatic forms, his inability to create dramatic action, his obsession for poetic diction and use of slangs in traditional African drama.

To tackle Soyinka’s obscurity and absurdity, one needs to understand what these terms imply, and why the playwright chose to effect them in his plays, even though, to the disapproval of some Nigerian readers. To be obscure is to be … ambiguous, blurred … complex … concealed … enigmatic … hazy. It is the
avoidance of appearance, clearness, lucidity (and sometimes) it may be viewed as secrecy or esotericism (The New Websters Dictionary SA - 40). Soyinka chose to embody most of these connotations of obscurity, not really by omission but by commission. His obscurity can be interpreted as his serious move towards the ratification of his theory of ritual tragic form. If African rituals are known for esotericism, secrecy, metaphysical complexity, or concealment of vital elements, then, an authentic ritual drama has the license – like Soyinka’s creations – to embody the elements of obscurity both in language and dramaturgy.

Soyinka is accused by Eldred Jones of paying no attention to the element of plot (62), but this neglect still conforms with the structure of indigenous ritual form which Soyinka is using. The problem created by Soyinka here is that the obscurity has turned into a communication evil, denying the very owners of the tradition – even many Yorubas – a high degree of clarity and receptiveness for the drama. Consequently, the necessity arises for clarity, lucidity and some degree of simplicity in style and dramaturgy. In terms of reception, therefore, obscurity and absurdity, if not removed from Soyinka’s drama – possibly by younger playwrights’ adaptations of the plays – will remain obstacles to good reception.

While the need arises for greater secularization of obscure and metaphysical elements of culture in drama by playwrights, younger writers can begin to rewrite Soyinka’s old metaphysical plays to appear less obscure. This will surely be achieved by doing what had been done to the gods or sacred performances in the past – secularizing them and giving them social base. Younger playwrights can rewrite Soyinka’s old absurdist plays like The Swamp Dwellers, A Dance of the Forests, The Road, The Strong Breed, and employ...
clearer, domesticated Nigerian brand of English expressions, demystifying the cultic tendencies of Yoruba metaphysics by secularizing the ideas about the gods which Soyinka allows to remain clothed in their sacred and esoteric senses.

In the history of theatre, this kind of innovation abounds in large numbers. Euripides reduced the importance of gods in Greek tragic performances of the 5th century B.C. According to Oscar G. Brockett, Euripides was a skeptic who questioned many Athenian ideals even the gods did not escape examination and in his plays, they were frequently made to appear petty and ineffectual… (72). Brockett also states, “Euripides’ characters often questioned the gods’ sense of justice since they seemed sources of misery as often as happiness (19). In Medieval drama, performances left the sacred milieu of the church service and went outside. According to Jerry V. Pickering;

By the beginning of the thirteenth century the liturgical plays had completed their evolution and were ready to leave the church … but the first recorded instance of an outdoor production is in 1204. Because of the attitudes toward drama held by many of the higher clergy … and especially the demands of an ever-growing audiences, the liturgical drama reached a dead end. Artistic advancement required that the plays be taken out of the church and set in the market place (112).

This secularization provided greater space for more reception of the drama. If Soyinka’s depth in ritual and metaphysics yields to a higher degree of appearance, clearness and lucidity readers will have less cause to disapprove his style. Critical reviews of Soyinka’s works can also help if they are done with a greater
recognition of the hybridity of Nigerian Literary Drama. African theories of
performance should be more deeply explored in the reviews while also
recognizing the place of Western approaches.

In view of J.P Clark’s lapses, Sam Ukala, through his theoretical
enunciations on folkism provides many remedial approaches, particularly to his
adapted folktale drama Ozidi and The Masquerade. According to Akpuda, Ukala
asserts that “lack of training in the art of dramatic composition” (29) scares
writers of folktale from turning to drama where the “untranslatable” aspects of the
performance can be translated. Ukala, therefore, insists that any writer who
“authentically and reliably wishes to transmit the African folktale by print” should
undergo training in playwriting (29). Again, the person must be immersed in the
norms of the African “traditional dramatic form” (29). By illustrating J.P.
Clark’s dexterity in compiling the Ozidi Saga, Ukala implies that much could be
borrowed from the compilation to correct whatever lapses are found in the literary
texts of Ozidi and The Masquerade. For example, a writer could learn from the
‘bilingual’, ‘role playing’, ‘domestication’ qualities of the Ozidi Saga and harness
them in re-writing the Ozidi play or a similar script.

A writer should also learn from the lapses identified in the Saga, and see
that related shortfalls are avoided in the Ozidi play or the likes of it. For instance,
Ukala identifies such pitfalls as “absence of Ijaw ideophonic ambience”, the lack
of “traditional linguistic flavour”. According to Akpuda, “in justifying his censure
of Clark’s limitations, Ukala cautions that … in trying to emulate Clark, collector
– translators may well avoid his pitfalls” (32). This study, in the same vein,
recommends that writers of plays should transpose the gains of Clark’s *Ozidi Saga* to the *Ozidi* play.

In other words, although in the *Ozidi* play, bilingualism would have been out of place, the closeness of the language to Ijo linguistic habits, incorporating the ideophonic and traditional linguistic flavour, would have paid better. The role playing quality would also have been very profitable. Ukala’s enunciations above also imply that, if a writer must ensure authenticated and reliable folktale dramatic script, he must undergo training in playwriting and must be versed in traditional African performance conventions.

There are other flaws in Clark’s writing that demand solution, such as indiscriminate mixture of Greek and Elizabethan conventions with indigenous drama, as already exemplified. In this case, it becomes preferable to employ universal themes, plot, character which may be borrowed from the Greek or western drama and blended with Nigerian scripts. Themes of ambition, stories of war stubbornness as a trait of character, can all fit more into African plays than discordant linguistic features.

The Nigerian civil war also posed problems that need solution. The war did not permit the writing of serious and known drama, though it sharpened the emotional sensibilities that led to revolutionary plays in the immediate decade that followed. Some of these plays manifested the Marxist ideology, while others represented a carryover from the syndrome of Greek adaptations that characterized the late colonial and early post colonial periods. Marxist plays had the contextual flaw of presenting an unrealizable sociopolitical ideology, the aesthetic lapse of poor characterization and undomesticated language. To correct
the Marxist flaws, the foreign ideology and language should be adapted to be realizable in African situation. There is no need recommending a Soviet or American brand socialist economy when the African communalism has been effectively working at the grassroot level.

Instead of the Marxist socialist approach, Nigerian plays should dramatize a more acceptable, more relevant and clearer ideology known as ‘communalism’ – a name for African extended family system, which involves communal ownership of the means of production, and a system of relationship where the eldest man takes charge of the communal economy on behalf of the community. The language of the Marxist drama should be ‘pushed back’ to reflect the traditional African revolutionary idioms and verbal inflections.

Reception problems of literary theatre of the recent period (1990s to 2010), which include the proliferation of poorly written plays, promotion of self-publishing syndrome, multiplication of mushroom publishing companies, misconstruing of screen plays as stage scripts, ignorance of playwriting techniques, impatience of amateur writers, and the poor aesthetic and sociological techniques of feminist writing also have some remedies. Poor scripting of plays can be combated by adequate equipment of educational theatre institutions with well trained teachers in the field of playwriting. Play critics should also intensify efforts to condemn substandard works and recommend the aesthetic and dramaturgical moves towards improvement. One of the most effective remedies to the writing of bad plays is acquisition of skills or exploitation of talent – which helps to enhance creative ingenuity. But in the absence of talent, skills can be acquired by learning the essential procedure of playwriting. Various procedures
are advocated by different writers which sometimes work in producing wonderful plays.

Presenting his own procedure, Ahmed Yerima who has many plays to his credit, including *The Angel and Other Plays* (2004), *Kaffirs Last Game*, *Tuti*, *Ameh Oboni the Great*, *Otaelo*, *Damis Cross and Alika’s Well*, *The Trials of Oba Ovonamwen*, *Attahiru*, *Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees*, Yemoja has this to say;

Preparing for the task of writing, certain things must be done by the playwright. He must read wide. Read other plays, by established playwrights: read Soyinka, Clark, Sowande, Sofola, Osofisan, Ogunyemi, Rotimi, Onwueme, Omotoso, and so on … start off by writing a one-page dialogue of the idea, then a scene, then one act, two acts and a play. Do not rush … secondly, choose and recognize the form which you intend to use. The plot will reveal if the play is tragedy or comedy. Thirdly, it is necessary to keep thinking and seeing and shaping characters into the play’s plot from real life. Always start from the known. Allow the conflict to be strong enough to hold the audience’s attention (100-101).

Yerima further states that the writer should be prepared to pass through difficult experiences in the process of writing. One example is the possibility of writing ‘drafts after drafts’ before achieving the final goal. The writer should be favourably disposed to criticism and needs to be hardworking and disciplined. Citing Chekov’s injunction for ‘the new playwright’, Yerima points out the need for making “the characters created … emerge on paper as the playwright saw them in his imagined illusion”. Furthermore, the writer should set out ‘to follow’ a
sequence that will culminate in a definite goal – which consequently helps to give meaning to the script (101).

It is worthwhile to include a number of important imperatives for writing good plays that are formulated in this study out of observations from other plays, comments from other playwrights on playwriting, through interviews and readings. These imperatives are here conceptualized as ‘eight point aesthetic enhancement strategy for budding playwrights’. They are:

- Research
- Treatment
- Character delineation
- Writing of drafts
- Criticism
- Audition
- Preview and objective publishing.

Research refers to the playwright’s preliminary task which involves him in reading other plays as Yerima validly enunciated above. The merits of this to the playwright’s experience, cannot be underestimated. Preliminary reading enables the playwright to know the genre he appreciates most, and how this kind of drama has been handled by older but established playwrights. For example, preliminary reading takes care of questions such as, what genre is written? Which concept of this genre is obvious in the writing? What did the playwright set out to achieve? How well did he achieve it through plot or absence of it, character, theme, language, music and spectacle?
After being exposed to many kinds of well written plays, the aspiring playwright comes up with an idea – a theme, a plot or an interesting character. Then, he writes a short synopsis from which he develops the ‘treatment’, that is, scene-by-scene description of necessary conflicts and actions, events and innovations (like myth creations), embellishments, wonders, surprises, dilemma, coincidence, and ideas to be adopted from other established plays, or from real life experiences. The treatment also enables the writer to visualize in advance, the staging problems and prospects of what he intend to create. As he does the treatment, he also takes care of exposition, rising action, climax and denouement. Character delineation is imperative after treatment. This is to enable the playwright visualize believable characters for his play.

These preparatory steps are followed by the actual writing of the play, which as Yerima suggests, involves drafts after drafts. Completing his writing, the writer has the after-writing duties to execute: he submits the play to another playwright or a competent reader to validate it as ‘an existence’ which has some meaning (as asserted by the reader-response theory). The reader submits vital critical observations to the writer, who sees new horizons and possibilities and reflects them in his play-though selectively.

This is followed by the ‘audition’ – a modality whereby the playwright organizes a reading session to enable him listen to the inflections, nuances, rhythm, and dramatic power of his dialogue for adjusting some lines of speech. Finally, the play is staged to provide opportunity for a critical session between the playwright and his potential readers who are going to watch the unpublished play on stage as a preview. At the end of both the preliminary and post writing
approaches of the eight point aesthetic strategy, the playwright, following experienced injunction that the writer should not be in a hurry to publish, looks for a standard publishing company – which may be close to established ones like Longmans, Oxford, Rinehart and Kegan Paul, Macmillan, ABIC, Kraft, Ibadan, AP. The writer should avoid incompetent publishing houses whose emblem on the publication will depict him as guilty of self-publishing and mar the reception of his work. The mere appearance of ‘Longman’ or ‘Kraft’ helps to beef up the reception of plays and give them the appearance of objective publishing.

In view of the problem associated with some playwrights’ misconstruing of movie scripts for the stage play, a brief comparison and contrast between the stage text and its screen counterpart can play a remedial role. Both film and stage employ imitation and theatricality which are elements of drama and theatre. Hence they share the principles of plot, character, theme, language, music and spectacle. They also share in generic distinctions such as tragedy, comedy, tragic-comedy; and they make use of space, acting time, and audience. But their similarities in these areas are limited by the immediacy and rigidity of the physical stage, as opposed to the physical distance and flexibility of the film. The actors on stage share the live presence and closeness that are absent in the relationship between their counterparts in film. The audience views the film through the eye of the camera, but on stage, they view action live. Hence, in film, action can be recorded for later viewing and as such it is not a live performance.

Another significant area where the similarities and contrasts between film and stage should be considered is the issue of scripting. Scripting is involved in both stage and film where it entails distinctive methods. Owing to the differences
between the stage and film as described above, the playwright must be careful not to allow the play script for the stage, degenerate into a film script. Hence, in plot, character, theme, language, music, and spectacle the peculiarities of stage over film, must be respected.

Because the flexibility of film and its advantage of greater technological exploitation, episodic, melodramatic or loose arrangement of incidents can be effectively managed; mythical, legendary and folkist episodes can be treated more convincingly in film through technological devices that cannot be employed on the stage. Deceits, fantasies, illusionistic creations, romantic conceptualizations, dream sequences can be achieved with greater conviction in film. Therefore, the plot in film allows a larger number of incidents or scenes and settings, greater use of fantasies, extensive romantic and melodramatic episodes. A stage play limits the number, extent and conceptualizations of these plot elements. There should be greater unity of time, place and action on stage. Indigenous African performances sometimes appear more amenable to the film due to their closeness to the features of film. But when they blend into literary stage script, problems are created by the structure of the live stage – especially the proscenium arch. For this reason, the playwright, in writing a modern African play, battles with solving the spatial problem by limiting the incidents to a well planned plot structure.

The rigidity of the stage and its immediacy also affect characterization in playwriting. The physical traits, movement, emotional and vocal, demands of the character, are more difficult to portray on the stage. Example, actions like crying, loving, jumping from a height, accidents, falling into a ditch, can be realized more convincingly in film than on the stage. Therefore, the playwright must be selective
in his attribution of these physical, vocal environmental and kinesthetic demands on the actor who must be in a great difficulty trying to convince the audience who are there for him. These considerations for the audience and stage relationship arise in this analysis of scriptwriting because, if the playwright fails to justify the stageability of his play, producers, proofreaders, valuers, and other critics will receive it with ignominy.

Thematically, the playwright must create profound themes, even universal ones, but he must focus on such ideas that can be realized within the precincts of the rigid stage. Ideas that demand film effects like supernatural, romantic and necromantic dramatization should be chosen with caution, since readers will begin to doubt the possibilities of exploring the theme to its full realization.

Musical effects and spectacle should be less demanding than those of film. Special effects like dreams, simultaneous sequences, are less feasible on the rigid and immediate stage, but in film, with the use of camera tricks and its computerized devices, most special effects are possible. The playwright must therefore understand these differences, and have them planted at the back of the mind, lest he writes a film script, in the guise of stage drama.

6.5 Conclusion

It has been possible, here, to articulate a number of possible suggestions towards improving the reception of literary theatre in Nigeria. Most evidently, the recommendations point out the need, in the first place, for readers’ positive disposition towards literary drama, rather than psychological bias. Identifying the gains of clarity and logicality in play composition, as well as the possibilities of
creating better plays through adaptation of already published works, some modalities for adapting plays have also been proposed.

Importantly, too, for a considerable enhancement of dramaturgy and aesthetics of written plays in Nigeria, an innovative strategy, comprising eight effective points of action are presented here to be employed by playwrights. Not left out among the above recommendations, is ideological reconsideration to ensure socio-cultural relevance of literary drama in Nigeria. Since the Nigerian literary theatre is largely poorly received, as observed in this study, playwrights, critics, and the general reading public can contribute immensely towards reducing the ugly situation by considering the measures proposed here for practical application.
CHAPTER SEVEN
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study has laid bare in a significant and comprehensive manner the main issues relating to the long neglected and almost darkening path of literary theatre reception, from the period 1948 to 2010. Through this copious illumination, numerous obstacles to reception that existed and were growing to alarming proportions, yet unnoticed and inadequately tackled, have been revealed. To crown it all, innovative and feasible approaches have been suggested towards breaking the boil of poor reception and pave the way for better critical approval.

The investigation proceeded along a sequence of historical events in Nigeria, beginning with colonialism. The research light beamed on this period, unveiled the imperialist chains that tied written drama to the colonial stake, denying it the local garb and colour which is needed for its rapport with reception agents in Nigeria. The colonial stake comprised classical and western literary models with which the educational theatre began its activities in the University College of Ibadan, in 1948. Consequently, there existed poorly adapted foreign plays, lack of indigenous texts, and an elitist group of Nigerians on whom the retrieval from the colonial bondage, paradoxically depended.

Of these elites, Soyinka and Clark were outstanding and took the leading position as first generation playwrights, who wielded skill and courage to initiate serious effort towards the untying of the colonial chains on drama. Although their efforts opened a new horizon for the march towards the freedom that was to span the postcolonial era, they manifested the lapses and inadequacies that often characterized most initiators of heroic goals.
Plays of this early Independence epoch were received with all kinds of frightening and undermining terms and conceptualizations, such as: ‘obscurity’, ‘absurdity’, ‘metaphysical’, ‘sketchiness’, ‘formalistic inadequacy’ and ‘aesthetic defect’ in language, adaptation and composition. The independence era was also associated with anti-receptive elements that crept into the writing of plays, such as post colonial sentimentalism, which engendered unilateral focus on contextual issues. The contextual concerns which jettisoned aesthetic standards, included cultural, historical and sociological factors. Although, this generated negative reception, this can be explained as an inevitable evil in a literary situation where writers were obsessed more with projecting Africans as people with body, soul, and mind that are culturally, socially and historically productive, rather than being completely blank and devoid of any iota of intellect. The contextual issues reached its peak in ethnocentric writings, use of tribal myths, dramatization of cultic or animist metaphysics, exhuming of historical antecedents, portrayal of cultural artifacts, and the conveyance of all this, in difficult and undomesticated exoticism of dramaturgy and aesthetics.

Following the absence of play texts attributable to the Nigerian civil war period of 1967 to 1970, light shifted to the post war period of 1970 to 1990, when the radical theatre and its shortfalls were illuminated. This theatre reflected the excesses of the military era which, together with the emotional stress of the civil war, built the revolutionary energy in the emotions, intellect and dramaturgy of the radical dramatists. Like their, predecessors who, unilaterally focused the contextual issues, to the detriment of aesthetic standards, the radical dramatists engendered the same receptive obstacle through their poor articulation of
language, character, as well as their projection of unrealistic, Marxist ideology, and their employment of Brechtian dramaturgy that was not enough to trigger immediate and practical action. Eventually, the Marxist ideology and the Brechtian aesthetics began to lose out, as the issues they set out to eradicate continued to escalated.

The post revolutionary era produced new trends of radicalism, which continued the same struggle of their predecessors against social oppression, but in an entirely different style. This style jettisoned the Brechtian aesthetics, as seen in Emeka Nwabueze and later Soyinka’s realistic, revolutionary, satire; Sam Ukala’s folkism, Zulu Sofola’s traditional ritualism and the feminist tendencies, Tess Onwueme and Irene Salami’s radical feminist echoes. Rotimi in his later works had shaded off the extremes of Marx. The feminist drama, in its later developed praxis, portrayed the radical, non-marxist ethos, through non Brechtian aesthetics.

These developments of literary drama, during the period 1948 to 2010, which began during the colonial era therefore manifested obvious traits that generally attracted poor reception; and critics did not hesitate to point them out with disapproval. Some other manifestations that generated poor reception were the theoretical approaches employed by readers. Not being familiar with the cultural depths of the African people, their world view, their ontological complexities, and their performance conventions, the readers relied on the western theories of drama as their critical tools which contradicted much of the Africans’ way of life.

The tools included the Aristotelian, neo-Aristotelian, formalist, structuralist theories, which are viewed here as aesthetic approaches. There were non aesthetic
theories employed, which were biographical, historical and sociological. Opposed to these Eurocentric approaches, were the African oriented theories developed from ritual, mythology, folktale, dance, music and song, which justify African performance approaches. Notable among them were Soyinka’s theories of ritual tragedy and Ukala’s folkism. However, the hybridity of Nigerian literary theatre creates the needs for the combination of the western and the African theories in the appraisal of Nigerian literary theatre. This is in recognition of the fact that the unilateral reliance on one theoretical base has engendered the under-reception of either the western or the African oriented plays.

To avoid ambiguity, the concept of reception is clarified as a function of textual reading. This is justified by the idea that if reception connotes the experiencing of a text and the acceptance of it as authoritative and valid, then the act of reading is indispensable. Furthermore, buttressed by the reader – response theory that the existence, meaning and quality of a text is determined by the interaction between the reader and the textual contents, the term ‘reception’ becomes tenably defined as a reading exercise whereby professional critics, ‘lay readers’ in the government, corporate bodies, individuals, theatre companies, university theatre art departments, are identified as readers who appraise texts and accord levels of reception to them.

This study found out that the readers, contextual and textual issues combined to engender and promote poor critical reception. In the same direction, remedial forces like readers’ exoneration of themselves from psychological indisposition to drama, historical antecedents, new methods of adaptation and re-adaptation of foreign plays – using traditional African performance media like
mythology, ritual, folktale, to replace or blend with western conventions of plot have also been suggested. Characterization and language are to be domesticated to draw them closer to the sensibility of African readers, and the methods of writing plays for the stage as distinct from those of the film are also recommended.

It is concluded here that the readers’ attitudes to reading, their skills, their psychological disposition to drama; then, textual defects of theme, plot, language and characterization, shortfalls in ideological and philosophical impulses, combined with historical antecedents and theoretical inadequacies to engender poor reception. This complicity between the reader, reading, and the drama texts towards the determination of reception, finds support in the reader-response theory. In view of these observations, there is the anticipation that the various innovative, remedial approaches suggested here, which mark some shift forward from the earlier efforts at solving the reception problem, may go a long way in enhancing both the readers’ critical methods, and improve the aesthetic, dramaturgical and contextual qualities of written drama in Nigeria.


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