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The African Playwright as a Social Commentator: A Critical Examination of West African Dramatic Traditions

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the role of the West African playwright as a social commentator, analysing how selected dramatists from Nigeria and Ghana deploy drama to address pressing social, political, economic, and cultural concerns. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Marxist literary criticism as complementary frameworks, and employing a qualitative, purposive textual analysis, the study focuses on works by Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efu Sutherland, Ola Rotimi, and Tess Onwueme. The findings are organised around four thematic domains of political corruption and leadership failure; colonial legacy and neocolonial critique; gender and patriarchy; and class struggle and economic inequality. The analysis demonstrates that West African playwrights consistently mobilise satire, allegory, myth, folklore, and Brechtian techniques to interrogate power and stimulate critical consciousness. The study's contribution lies in its cross-national comparative framework, which reveals a shared dramaturgical logic underpinning diverse national traditions. It concludes by arguing that this tradition constitutes a West African dramaturgy of commitment, offering a rich repertoire of strategies for community theatre performance in contemporary African contexts.

Keywords: African Drama, Social Commentary, West African Playwrights, Postcolonial Theatre, Committed Literature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The African playwright has, from the earliest days of modern African literary expression, served as a voice of the people, a conscience of society, and a mirror through which communities confront their realities. This tradition is deeply rooted in the ancient role of the griot, the West African oral historian, storyteller, and social critic whose role in pre-colonial societies was never merely to entertain but to instruct, warn, praise, and censure (Hale, 1998). The transition from oral performance to modern written drama did not diminish this critical function; instead, the modern West African playwright inherited and adapted the griot's mantle, converting the stage into a platform for urgent social address (Banham *et al.*, 1999).

At the heart of this study lies a central tension asking how West African playwrights negotiate the demands of aesthetic excellence alongside the imperative of political commitment, and through what specific dramaturgical strategies is social commentary realised? While existing scholarship is extensive, it remains largely confined to single-author or single-nation analyses. What is missing is a cross-national comparative

framework capable of revealing the shared logics that structure West African social commentary drama as a regional formation. This study addresses that gap through a cross-national comparative analysis of Nigerian and Ghanaian dramatic traditions. The history of West African drama is inseparable from its social and political history. The colonial encounter, the struggle for independence, the disillusionment of the postcolonial era, the persistence of neocolonial exploitation, and enduring struggles over gender, class, and economic justice have all found powerful expression in the works of West African playwrights (Obafemi, 2001). From Wole Soyinka's searing satires of authoritarian rule to Ama Ata Aidoo's explorations of gender and colonial identity, from Femi Osofisan's revolutionary interrogations of class and power to Efu Sutherland's community-oriented participatory theatre, West African drama has consistently been a literature of engagement; a committed art that refuses to separate aesthetics from social responsibility (Jeyifo, 1985).

The purpose of this study is to critically examine how selected West African playwrights function as social commentators through their dramatic

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works. Specifically, the study pursues three objectives which are, (i) to examine how West African playwrights use drama to critique political corruption, leadership failure, and authoritarian governance; (ii) to analyse how selected works address colonial legacy, neocolonial exploitation, gender inequality, and class struggle; and (iii) to evaluate the dramatic strategies employed and their implications for contemporary Theatre for Development. The significance of this study lies in its comparative, thematic scope. Rather than treating playwrights in isolation, it reveals the collective intellectual architecture of West African social commentary drama and extracts from it practical implications for Tfd practice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of West African drama has generated a substantial body of scholarship that foregrounds its deep entanglement with social, political, and cultural realities. Across this literature, a consistent concern emerges around the relationship between aesthetic form and social commitment. Scholars have examined this relationship through diverse theoretical lenses, most notably postcolonial theory and Marxist literary criticism, each offering distinct but complementary insights into how African playwrights engage structures of power, identity, and inequality. This review situates the present study within these debates, critically engaging key theoretical positions while identifying the need for a cross-national, comparative framework that can account for the shared dramaturgical strategies of West African social commentary drama.

2.1 Postcolonial Theory and African Drama

Postcolonial theory provides one of the most important frameworks for understanding the social and political dimensions of African drama, though its application to this tradition is not without critical contestation. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) remains foundational. Fanon argued that colonialism was not merely a political and economic system but a total cultural project that sought to erase the colonised people's sense of identity and history. His analysis of cultural consciousness, from assimilation through nostalgia to a fighting literature that galvanises the people, offers a useful trajectory for mapping the development of West African drama from colonial mimicry to radical social commitment. However, scholars such as Olaniyan (1995) have cautioned against applying Fanon's framework too schematically, noting that African dramatists often inhabit multiple stages simultaneously, deploying aesthetic hybridity as a deliberate political strategy rather than as evidence of incomplete decolonisation.

Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the third space (Bhabha, 1994) have enriched readings of African drama, particularly plays such as Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), in which cultural encounter produces not simply conflict but

complex new formations. Yet Bhabha's emphasis on ambivalence has been criticised by African scholars who insist on the material specificity of colonial violence and the necessity of unambiguous political resistance (Chinweizu *et al.*, 1980). This debate is productive for the present study because it highlights the tension that West African playwrights themselves navigate between aesthetic complexity and direct social intervention.

2.2 Marxist Literary Criticism and Brechtian Epic Theatre

Marxist literary criticism offers a complementary and sometimes competing framework. Biodun Jeyifo's *The Truthful Lie* (1985) argued that African drama is characterised by a fundamental tension between aesthetic qualities and social-political functions. For Jeyifo, the most significant African dramatists use the aesthetic power of theatre to reveal social truths that dominant ideologies seek to conceal, a process he described as the "truthful lie" of art. This formulation resists the reduction of drama to propaganda while insisting on its social accountability, and it remains the most nuanced framework for evaluating the critical practice of West African dramatists.

Bertolt Brecht's theory of epic theatre has been a significant influence, particularly on the radical tradition exemplified by Femi Osofisan. Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, sought to prevent audiences from passively identifying with characters and instead encouraged critical reflection on the social conditions depicted (Brecht, 1964). Osofisan has been widely described as the most Brechtian of African dramatists, combining indigenous performance traditions with Brechtian techniques to create a distinctly African revolutionary theatre (Awodiya, 1993; Richards, 1996). The intellectual controversy between Soyinka, who warned against reducing art to didactic messaging, and Osofisan, who insisted on the political obligations of the playwright, represents perhaps the most generative debate in West African drama scholarship, and it animates the analytical questions of this study.

2.3 African Drama Scholarship and the Research Gap

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the social, political, and cultural dimensions of African drama. Penina Mlamba's *Culture and Development* (1991) demonstrated the continuity between traditional African performance and contemporary Theatre for Development, arguing that community-based theatre is grounded in the principle that performance belongs to the people and should serve their interests. Olu Obafemi's *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre* (2001) traced the relationship between cultural heritage and social vision in Nigerian playwriting, while Tejumola Olaniyan's *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance* (1995) examined the postcolonial dimensions of African dramatic identity. Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979) and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) have

provided foundational support for participatory and community-based theatre across the continent.

What remains underdeveloped in the literature is a systematic, cross-national comparative analysis that examines West African playwrights collectively as social commentators, identifying the common strategies and concerns that unite dramatists across national boundaries. Most studies privilege either single-author monographs or single-nation surveys. This study addresses that gap by offering a thematic comparative reading of Nigerian and Ghanaian dramatic traditions, thereby revealing the regional coherence of West African social commentary drama as a distinct intellectual and artistic formation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, desk-based research design. The primary analytical method is purposive textual and content analysis, involving the close reading and critical interpretation of selected dramatic texts within their social, historical, and theoretical contexts. Textual analysis is particularly suited to this study as it enables sustained engagement with theme, language, structure, characterisation, and ideological positioning within dramatic texts, while remaining attentive to their historical and socio-political embeddedness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The textual approach employed here goes beyond descriptive summary; it applies theoretical triangulation, reading each dramatic text simultaneously through postcolonial and Marxist frameworks to generate interpretive insights that neither framework alone could produce.

The selection of playwrights and plays was guided by three purposive criteria. The playwright must be from a West African country, specifically Nigeria or Ghana, which have the most developed traditions of social commentary drama in the region; the selected works must contain significant elements of social commentary addressing political, economic, cultural, or gender-related issues; and the works must be recognised in the scholarly literature as important contributions to African drama. Based on these criteria, the study focuses on Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland, and Tess Onwueme. This selection intentionally represents both Nigerian and Ghanaian traditions and includes male and female playwrights, enabling gender-sensitive comparative analysis. Playwrights from Eastern or Southern Africa have been excluded to maintain geographic focus and regional coherence.

The theoretical framework combines postcolonial theory (Fanon, 1963; Bhabha, 1994) and Marxist literary criticism (Eagleton, 1976; Jeyifo, 1985; Brecht, 1964). The analysis proceeds in four thematic categories, identified through a preliminary reading of all selected texts and validated against the existing thematic literature, namely political corruption and leadership

failure; colonial legacy and neocolonial critique; gender, patriarchy, and women's agency; and class struggle, economic inequality, and social justice. The thematic rather than playwright-by-playwright organisation is a deliberate methodological choice, enabling comparative analysis across national, gender, and ideological lines. This methodological design ensures that the study moves beyond descriptive interpretation to theoretically grounded comparative analysis, allowing patterns of dramaturgical strategy to emerge across texts rather than within isolated works.

4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings of the study through a thematic analysis of selected dramatic texts. Rather than organising the discussion by individual playwrights, the analysis adopts a cross-cutting approach that highlights recurring concerns and shared dramaturgical strategies across West African drama. Four dominant thematic domains emerge from the data, namely political corruption and leadership failure; colonial legacy and neocolonial critique; gender and patriarchy; and class struggle and economic inequality. These themes provide a structured framework for examining how playwrights mobilise dramatic form as a mode of social commentary and critical intervention.

4.1 *Political Corruption and Leadership Failure*

One of the most persistent themes in West African drama is the critique of political corruption and leadership failure. The disillusionment that followed independence, as newly sovereign nations fell under authoritarian leaders, military dictators, and corrupt elites, provided fertile ground for dramatic social commentary. West African playwrights responded with works of extraordinary analytical and artistic power, using satire, allegory, and direct critique to hold political leaders accountable and to articulate the aspirations of ordinary citizens for just and democratic governance.

Wole Soyinka has been perhaps the most prolific and courageous dramatist in this regard. His play *Kongi's Harvest* (1965) is a searing satire of the African dictator, dramatising the conflict between traditional authority and the modern secular state personified by the tyrannical Kongi. The proverbial wisdom of Sarumi captures the play's central tension with remarkable concision.

"We lift the king's umbrella higher than men, but it never pushes the sun in the face." (Soyinka, 1965, p. 8)

Sarumi's words, spoken in contrast to Kongi's authoritarian ambitions, encapsulate the play's central argument. The legitimate, community-embedded authority of the traditional ruler cannot be appropriated to sanctify the illegitimate regime of the postcolonial strongman. Soyinka deepens this critique through the regime's own self-image, satirised in the vision of

"children handing the patriarch his pipe at evening, crouching at his feet to sip raindrops of wisdom." (Soyinka, 1965, p. 22)

The sentimentalised pastoral image exposes the ideological fiction that authoritarian rule constructs to justify its power — a fiction in which the dictator masquerades as a benevolent elder and the citizens are reduced to grateful children. Soyinka returned to the theme of political tyranny with even greater ferocity in *A Play of Giants* (1984), which lampoons four African dictators gathered at the United Nations. In *Opera Wonyosi* (1981), he adapted Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* to the Nigerian context, creating a biting critique of the alliance between political leaders, military officers, and organised crime. The paranoia and brutality underlying authoritarian rule finds its most vivid expression in Emperor Boky's furious outburst.

Liar! They sing bad songs about me, their Imperial Papa. Ingrates! Parricides! Bring them to me Inspector. Round them up. Fetch me the criminals... Give your Emperor a clean empire. Sanitate. Fumigate. Renovate. (Soyinka, 1981, pp. 335–336)

Emperor Boky's outburst, triggered by schoolchildren's protests, lays bare the paranoia and brutality underlying authoritarian rule. Soyinka's satire achieves its keenest edge here. The ruler who styles himself a benevolent patriarch is exposed as a petulant tyrant who equates dissent with criminality. The verbs, sanitate, fumigate, renovate, cast political opponents as pollutants to be exterminated, a chilling echo of the dehumanising language of real African dictatorships. The language does not merely describe violence; it performs the ideological logic by which violence is made to appear hygienic.

In *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964), Soyinka extended his critique to the intersection of religious charlatanism and political manipulation. Brother Jero's candid self-revelation lays bare the mechanics of manufactured helplessness.

"Once they are full, they won't come again. Like my good apprentice, Brother Chume. He wants to beat his wife, but I won't let him. If I do, he will become contented, and then that's another of my flock gone forever. As long as he doesn't beat her, he comes here feeling helpless, and so there is no chance of his rebelling against me. Everything, in fact, is planned." (Soyinka, 1964, p. 10)

This admission exposes the deliberate manufacture of dependency as both a religious and political strategy, revealing how power sustains itself not through resolution but through the continuous production of need. Soyinka implicates a wider culture in which leaders both religious and political alike systematically cultivate helplessness to secure

uncontested authority. The strategy of deferral finds its popular counterpart in Chume's improvised sermon.

"Those who are petty trader today, make them big contractor tomorrow. Those who dey sweep street today, give them their own big office tomorrow." (Soyinka, 1964, p. 26)

Chume's ecstatic prayer captures the hollow promises of deferred prosperity that both religious charlatans and politicians use to pacify the masses, transforming genuine grievance into passive hope.

Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977) offered a comedic but no less incisive critique of political corruption. The play follows Lejoka-Brown, a retired military officer who enters politics by exploiting his multiple marriages for political advantage. Lejoka-Brown's combative declaration encapsulates Rotimi's satirical target.

"Politics is war. Oooh — I am taking no chances this time, brother mine. I took things slow and easy and what happened? Chuu! I lost a by-election to a... a small crab... a baby monkey..." (Rotimi, 1977, p. 14)

The militaristic metaphor also known as "*politics is war*" immediately signals the opportunistic, ambition-driven politician for whom governance is a battlefield of personal gain rather than a vocation of public service. The comic self-deprecation only sharpens the critique, since the audience recognises in Lejoka-Brown the archetypal postcolonial politician whose incompetence is matched only by his appetite for power. Rotimi's use of comedy of farcical situations, mistaken identities, physical humour is a deliberate dramaturgical choice which renders the critique accessible to popular audiences while lowering the psychological defences that direct political indictment might raise.

Femi Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers* (1980) posed a more radical question of who the real thieves in Nigerian society are. By juxtaposing petty criminals awaiting execution with the far greater thefts committed by those in positions of power, Osofisan challenged his audience to question the moral foundations of a society that punishes the poor for crimes of survival while rewarding the rich for crimes of avarice. The play's innovative use of audience participation, in which the audience is invited to decide the fate of the robbers, reflects Osofisan's commitment to a democratic and transformative theatre (Osofisan, 1980; Awodiya, 1993). The play's refusal of a morally clean resolution is philosophically deliberate, an element which Osofisan describes as surreptitious insurrection. Osofisan does not want audiences to leave having passed comfortable judgement on fictional criminals; he wants them to leave unsettled about their own role in sustaining the social conditions that produce crime.

Comparatively, Soyinka and Rotimi employ satire primarily as a weapon of exposure, targeting the individual pathology of the corrupt leader and the absurdity of the political opportunist, while Osofisan uses Brechtian participation to implicate the audience itself in systemic critique. Soyinka's drama operates in the mode of moral witness where he places the playwright as diagnostician of power while Osofisan's operates in the mode of collective transformation where the playwright acts as an architect of political agency. Both traditions, however, converge on the conviction that the playwright's function is not merely to represent corruption but to activate critical consciousness in its audience.

4.2 Colonial Legacy and Neocolonial Critique

West African playwrights have been deeply concerned with the enduring legacies of colonialism and the operations of neocolonialism in postcolonial Africa, examining the cultural, psychological, and structural dimensions of domination and its aftereffects.

Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) was a pioneering work in this regard. The play explores the cultural conflicts that arise when Ato, a young Ghanaian man educated in America,

"Shall I go to Cape Coast / Shall I go to Elmina? / I don't know." (Aidoo, 1965, p. 28)

The reference to the coastal slave forts in Cape Coast Castle and Elmina is historically charged because these are the very sites through which enslaved Africans were transported across the Atlantic. Ato's indecision is therefore not only personal but historical, and the children's song encodes the rupture of the slave trade in the most innocent of cultural forms. The First Woman's lament to the African American Eulalie deepens the social commentary to its most profound level.

Barren! If it is real barrenness. Then, oh stranger-girl, Whom I do not know, I weep for you. For I know what it is to start a marriage with barrenness. (Aidoo, 1965, p. 36)

Aidoo positions barrenness not only as a biological condition but as a metaphor for the cultural and historical void produced by the transatlantic slave trade where Eulalie is barren of roots, of belonging, of the African heritage stolen from her ancestors. In weeping for the "stranger-girl," Aidoo extends communal sympathy across the divide of history, implicating colonial rupture as a wound that continues to structure the postcolonial present. By rendering structural history through the domestic and gendered space of family and marriage, Aidoo demonstrates that the most powerful social commentary is not declaimed from without but discovered within the intimate textures of lived experience.

Aidoo's *Anowa* (1970) extended this analysis to precolonial forms of exploitation. Set in the nineteenth century, the play traces how Kofi Ako's participation in the slave trade corrupts him morally and spiritually. Through *Anowa's* prophetic voice, Aidoo delivers a devastating critique of the internal African complicity in colonial capitalism.

"Money-making is like a god possessing a priest. He never will leave you, until he has occupied you, wholly changed the order of your being, and seared you through and up and down." (Aidoo, 1970, p. 51)

Kofi Ako's trajectory from humble trader to slave-owner mirrors the seductive logic of colonial capitalism that transforms Africans into agents of their own exploitation. Aidoo's willingness to implicate African elites in the slave trade constitutes a bold intervention in historical consciousness, refusing both the exculpatory narrative that casts all Africans as victims and the nationalist narrative that displaces all culpability onto European colonisers. The play insists on a moral complexity of history that belongs to everyone, and that therefore demands reckoning from everyone.

Efua Sutherland's *Edufa* (1967) addressed colonial modernity's corrosive impact on traditional values through her adaptation of Euripides' *Alcestis* to a Ghanaian setting. Sutherland's dramaturgical choice to rework a Greek text through a Ghanaian lens is itself a postcolonial act of cultural reclamation where she tries to demonstrate that classical dramatic form is not the exclusive property of Western literary tradition. She demonstrated that the moral questions about sacrifice, greed, and the corruption of human relationships are not mutually exclusive to westerners but are equally urgent in the African context. The play thus enacts at the level of form what it argues at the level of content, demonstrating that cultural encounter need not mean cultural subordination. *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) drew on the Ananse storytelling tradition to critique the commodification of human relationships. When Anansewa protests, "I will not let you sell me like some parcel to a customer" (Sutherland, 1975, p. 19), Sutherland introduces a note of feminist resistance into a comedic fable, ensuring that the laughter of recognition carries an edge of discomfort. The contrast with Aidoo's tragic mode is instructive. Where Aidoo uses tragedy to foreground irresolvable historical rupture, Sutherland uses comedy to make critique pleasurable and accessible, a distinction with direct implications for community theatre practice, since different communities may require different affective registers to engage productively with painful social truths.

4.3 Gender, Patriarchy, and Women's Agency

The critique of gender inequality and patriarchal structures has been a significant, though sometimes underappreciated, dimension of West African dramatic tradition. Women playwrights, in particular,

have used the stage to challenge the marginalisation of women's voices and to assert women's agency against patriarchal oppression.

Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1992) is one of the most powerful dramatic challenges to patriarchy in the West African canon. The play, set in a fictional Nigerian community, tells the story of a woman who ascended to political power in a patriarchal society and used her authority to challenge entrenched gender hierarchies and reconfigured systems of governance.

Iyase: (Standing) then king, if we must deliberate on such serious matters, women and the youths must be sent away. Wazobia: I do not see any reason why women... must be kept away. (Onwueme, 1992, p. 18)

Iyase's demand to exclude women enacts the very silencing strategy that Onwueme's play seeks to expose and dismantle. Wazobia's refusal is not merely a personal assertion of authority; it is a structural intervention in the governance of the kingdom, challenging the foundational assumption that women are unfit for political deliberation. Wazobia's royal decree constitutes one of the most explicit feminist manifestos in African drama:

The king has gathered you to make this pronouncement, that whatever you call yourself, you are. Everyone of you, first and foremost are HUMAN BEINGS with potentials waiting to be actualized for the benefit of this kingdom... Henceforth, we all, man woman, shall have equal rights... none is a slave to another. Man and woman are decreed as partners in progress. (Onwueme, 1992, p. 29)

By issuing this decree in the authoritative register of traditional kingship, Onwueme subverts patriarchal political form from within, converting the very institution that has historically oppressed women into the instrument of their liberation. The repetition of "HUMAN BEINGS" in capitals underscores the play's insistence that women's rights are not a concession but a recognition of an already existing humanity. Wazobia further identifies the patriarchal alliance against women with acute political precision.

"I know often when men are united. When they have a common enemy and that is WOMAN." (Onwueme, 1992, p. 29)

This identification of the patriarchal consensus, that women constitute the "common enemy", functions as a moment of devastating structural clarity, delivered through dramatic dialogue that compels the audience to confront the systemic nature of gender oppression rather than its merely interpersonal manifestations. Onwueme's later play, *Then She Said It* (2002), broadened the scope of her feminist critique to encompass the exploitation of

women by Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1970) made a complementary contribution to the dramatisation of gender. *Anowa's* philosophical observation, spoken in defence of her refusal to conform to prescribed gender roles, encapsulates Aidoo's feminist dramaturgy.

"The best way to sharpen a knife is not to whet one side of it only. And neither can you solve a riddle by considering only one end of it." (Aidoo, 1970, p. 47)

The knife-sharpening image insists that a community which silences half of its members, its women, blunts its own capacity for growth and self-understanding. The play's tragic ending, in which both *Anowa* and Kofi Ako die, underscores the destructive consequences of a society that cannot accommodate women's autonomy and moral vision.

Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1982) presented a distinctive perspective by casting a woman as the agent of revolutionary change. Based on the historical Moremi legend, the play tells the story of Titubi, a privileged young woman who joins a workers' revolt against the ruling class. Adugo's rallying call articulates this vision with conviction.

As women, we have to do what we feel is right, even if men try to stop us. (Osofisan, 1982, p. 24)

Adugo's manifesto reveals Osofisan's investment in feminist praxis as integral to revolutionary politics. For Osofisan, the liberation of the oppressed masses cannot be achieved without the active participation of women; gender justice and class justice are inseparable dimensions of the same struggle. That a male Marxist playwright casts a woman as the engine of class revolution is itself a significant dramaturgical statement, challenging the assumption that radical drama is the exclusive province of male authorship and experience. Comparing Onwueme, Aidoo, and Osofisan on gender reveals a spectrum of strategies. Onwueme employs a woman-centred structural critique delivered in the authoritative register of kingship; Aidoo uses personal tragedy to expose communal failure; Osofisan integrates feminist agency into class analysis. Together they constitute a multi-voiced and theoretically sophisticated feminist dramaturgy.

4.4 Class Struggle, Economic Inequality, and Social Justice

The theme of class struggle and economic inequality runs through much of West African committed drama, reflecting the stark material realities of societies marked by extreme disparities of wealth and power.

Femi Osofisan has been the most consistently class-conscious of West African playwrights. *Red is the Freedom Road* (1983) dramatised the historical struggle of enslaved people against their oppressors, using the

past to comment on the present-day exploitation of the Nigerian working class. The play's didactic structure, its use of songs and direct address, and its insistence on the possibility of collective resistance reflected Osofisan's debt to Brechtian epic theatre and his commitment to a revolutionary aesthetic. Akanji's battle cry articulates the collective vision at the heart of Osofisan's revolutionary dramaturgy:

Warriors, the road is hard but straight. We shall fight our way to freedom. Why, together we are brothers!... All slaves will be free. There will be none among us in chains! All captured shall return to their homes. (Osofisan, 1983, p. 135)

The insistence on brotherhood and solidarity reflects the Marxist conviction that emancipation must be achieved collectively, not individually. The imagery of chains and captivity deliberately connects the play's immediate political context to the longer history of African oppression and resistance. Akanji's dying words deepen this vision.

"I have set our men free. Look! They dance there, happy in their dancing. They are the rulers now." (Osofisan, 1983, p. 137)

These words, transforming personal sacrifice into collective triumph, embody Osofisan's recurring dramaturgical conviction that liberation requires the willingness of individuals to subordinate private survival to collective freedom. *The Oriki of a Grasshopper* (1986) extended this exploration of class and power, using the metaphor of the oriki, the Yoruba praise song, to expose the ideological functions of cultural forms that celebrate exploiters while silencing the exploited. The play's self-reflexive interrogation, its insistence that theatre itself is not exempt from ideological critique, represents Osofisan's most theoretically sophisticated contribution to the tradition (Osofisan, 1986; Awodiya, 1993).

Once Upon Four Robbers (1980) offers a sustained meditation on the pervasiveness of economic greed. The market woman's confession that she dreams of "a house the size of a palace! The law, tamed with my bank account! And children!... I'll own the main streets, six, no,... ten Mercedes, the neon lights, the supermarkets..." (Osofisan, 1980, p. 52) exposes the pervasive materialism that Osofisan sees as corroding the moral fabric of Nigerian society. By assigning this fantasy to an ordinary market woman rather than a politician or a robber, Osofisan complicates his social critique, for greed, the play suggests, is not simply the vice of the powerful but a cultural pathology that infects all levels of society. The play thus refuses the easy moral binary of oppressor and oppressed, demanding that audiences confront their own complicity in the systems they deplore.

Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964) addressed economic exploitation through the lens of religious charlatanism. Brother Jeroboam's manipulation of Chume where he deliberately withholds permission for a trivial act to sustain manufactured helplessness is, as argued in the political corruption section, simultaneously an economic strategy. The prophet is a businessman whose product is false hope. The play's enduring popularity attests to the continuing relevance of this critique in a region where prosperity gospel preachers and self-appointed prophets continue to exploit the economically vulnerable (Soyinka, 1964; Gibbs, 2009).

Efua Sutherland's approach to issues of class and social justice differed from that of Osofisan and Soyinka in its emphasis on community-oriented theatre. Through her pioneering work at the Drama Studio in Accra and her development of the kodzidan (story house) concept, Sutherland sought to create a theatre rooted in the life of ordinary Ghanaian communities, serving as a tool for popular education, community building, and cultural renewal. Her vision of participatory theatre, in which people are not merely audiences but active creators and performers, anticipated many of the principles later developed in the Theatre for Development movement (Mlama, 1991; Gibbs, 2009). This is the point at which the West African dramatic tradition most directly connects to contemporary TFD practice. Sutherland's theatre is not merely a text about community but a communal process; an embodied methodology that TFD practitioners can directly inherit and adapt.

5. DISCUSSION

The foregoing analysis reveals that West African playwrights have consistently functioned as social commentators, using drama to address the most pressing political, economic, cultural, and gender issues of their societies. This finding is consistent with the arguments of Jeyifo (1985), who identified social commitment as a defining characteristic of African drama, and Obafemi (2001), who traced the social vision of Nigerian theatre to its roots in indigenous cultural heritage. However, the comparative analysis undertaken here advances beyond these earlier arguments in important ways.

The study reveals that West African social commentary drama cannot be understood through a single theoretical lens. From a postcolonial perspective, the works examined demonstrate the continuing relevance of Fanon's (1963) call for a national culture that actively supports the liberation and development of the people. Yet, as Bhabha (1994) and Olaniyan (1995) would suggest, the most sophisticated works, particularly those of Aidoo and Sutherland, operate not through direct confrontation with colonial structures but through the creative reappropriation of those structures. Aidoo converts the dilemma tale form into a vehicle for

historical critique; Sutherland transforms the Greek classical form and the Ananse tradition simultaneously. This demonstrates that the most subversive strategy is sometimes not refusal but transformation from within.

From a Marxist perspective, the class-consciousness of Osofisan's drama and the economic critique embedded in Soyinka's religious satire demonstrate the centrality of material analysis to West African social commentary. The "truthful lie" of which Jeyifo (1985) wrote is most evident in the way these playwrights use aesthetic resources, including satire, allegory, myth, and Brechtian technique, to reveal social truths that dominant ideologies seek to conceal. The dramatic quotations analysed in this study demonstrate this most vividly. Soyinka's Emperor Boky does not simply represent a tyrant; his language, *sanitate, fumigate, renovate*, reveals the structural logic by which authoritarian power dehumanises its opponents. Osofisan's Akanji does not simply call for freedom; his solidarity with a collective "we" enacts the Marxist conviction that emancipation is always a communal rather than an individual project.

These findings must, however, be set against counter-arguments that complicate this picture. Critics have questioned whether the critical practice of West African drama effectively reaches those it purports to serve. Much of this drama was produced in written English for elite, educated audiences in urban theatres, a situation that arguably reproduces the very cultural hierarchies it critiques (Barber, 2000; Kerr, 1995). Osofisan himself has acknowledged the paradox that revolutionary theatre performed before university audiences may reinforce rather than disrupt existing class structures. Soyinka's opposition to reducing art to direct political messaging, while philosophically coherent, has been challenged by critics who argue that aesthetic complexity can become a form of political evasion, accessible only to those with cultural capital (Chinweizu *et al.*, 1980). These are genuine limitations that any comprehensive account of West African dramatic tradition must acknowledge. They also explain the enduring importance of Sutherland's model of community-based participatory theatre, which sought to bridge the gap between elite literary drama and genuine popular engagement.

The implications for African communal development are significant and practical. The works examined demonstrate that the most effective forms of development communication are those grounded in indigenous cultural logics. Sutherland's kodzidan concept, Osofisan's participatory audience structures, and Aidoo's use of the dilemma tale format all offer development practitioners concrete dramaturgical tools for facilitating critical reflection in community settings. The comparative analysis also reveals that different social issues call for different dramaturgical strategies. Satire is effective for targeting elite corruption; tragedy

is powerful for processing historical wounds; comedy is valuable for rendering critique accessible; and participatory techniques are essential for converting spectatorship into agency. Community development practitioners who draw on this dramatic inheritance are thus not borrowing from literary tradition but recovering an indigenous epistemology of social transformation (Mlama, 1991; Prentki & Preston, 2009).

Taken together, these findings point toward what may be described as a West African dramaturgy of commitment, a mode of theatrical practice in which aesthetic form and social critique are not opposing forces but mutually constitutive processes. Within this dramaturgy, satire, myth, participation, and narrative indirection function not merely as artistic devices but as epistemological tools through which societies come to know, question, and transform themselves. This is the most significant theoretical contribution of this study, the articulation of a coherent regional dramaturgical system, grounded in shared strategies of social critique that transcend the boundaries of individual national traditions.

The performance dimension of this tradition warrants acknowledgement. The present study has focused on dramatic texts, but drama is a performance art, and the critical work of a play is realised not only in its writing but in its staging, direction, and audience reception within specific social contexts (Kerr, 1995; Barber, 2000). The fact that Sutherland's community theatre, Osofisan's open-air popular productions, and Soyinka's festival theatre represent radically different performance contexts underscores the point that textual analysis alone, however rigorous, captures only part of the social reality that West African drama creates. A performance-based study, drawing on ethnographic observation of actual productions, would complement and enrich these findings.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has critically examined the role of the West African playwright as a social commentator through a thematic comparative analysis of selected dramatic works from Nigeria and Ghana. The analysis has demonstrated that West African playwrights have consistently used their art to address the most pressing social, political, economic, and cultural issues of their societies, deploying a diverse arsenal of dramatic strategies, including satire, allegory, myth, folklore, audience participation, and Brechtian alienation effects, that are both aesthetically sophisticated and socially purposeful.

The central contribution of this study lies in articulating a cross-national framework through which West African drama can be understood not simply as a collection of national traditions, but as a coherent dramaturgical system grounded in shared strategies of social critique and transformation. The textual evidence

drawn from the plays, from Soyinka's verbal exposure of authoritarian ideology, through Aidoo's deployment of communal lament to address colonial rupture, to Osofisan's solidarity cry as a vehicle of class consciousness, demonstrates that these playwrights are not merely commenting on society but crafting specific, identifiable dramaturgical tools for activating critical thought. Together they constitute a West African dramaturgy of commitment. Rooted in the griot tradition of the storyteller-critic, theoretically informed by postcolonial and Marxist thought, and practically oriented towards the liberation and development of the people.

The study has also engaged, rather than evaded, the limitations of this tradition, specifically its historical orientation towards elite and literate audiences, the unresolved tension between aesthetic complexity and popular accessibility, and the necessary gap between text and performance. These limitations are not failures of individual playwrights but structural conditions that point towards the most important implication of this study, which is the need for a new synthesis between the literary tradition examined here and the participatory, community-based tradition of Community Development, in which the dramaturgical strategies of the West African canon are made accessible to communities who are both the subjects of social commentary and the agents of social change.

Future research should extend this comparative analysis to include younger and emerging West African playwrights who are extending social commentary through new forms and media; examine the social commentary function of drama in performance rather than text alone; and further develop the theoretical framework proposed here for understanding West African drama as an indigenous epistemology of social transformation. In this sense, the West African playwright emerges not only as a commentator on society, but as a theorist of transformation, one whose dramaturgy continues to offer vital resources for reimagining the relationship between culture, power, and development in contemporary Africa.

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