

The Literary Artist and Social Cohesion in a Multi-Lingual Setting: A Study of Ola Rotimi's *If... A Tragedy of the Ruled and Hopes of the Living Dead*

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Introduction

Human beings naturally communicate with one another to enhance social cohesion and sustainable development. That language is one of the media of communication and a reliable one for that matter, has almost become a platitude. Sapir sees language as “a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols” (8). This is handled slightly differently by Christophersen who emphasizes that the expression of one’s thought and feelings should engender understanding from the receiver(s). However, Barber describes language as “the great machine - tool which makes human culture possible” (1). Velma Pollard, quoting James Baldwin, submits that “people evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances or in order not to be submerged by a reality they cannot articulate” (60). Whichever way language is described, what is imperative, as observed by Femi Akindele and Wale Adegbite is that it is used “to establish social relationship” (2).

However, borders created by diversity in language used by individuals from different backgrounds have the potential to impede the establishment of social interactions. Different inter and intra interactions amongst people, mostly across borders, have led to the emergence of multiplicity in linguistic usage. One of the many manifestations of such, is multilingualism. This is supported by Gerda Mansour who holds that “forced labour migration, military conscription under colonial rule added to

other movements that led to a new linguistic heterogeneity” (24). The characters in Ola Rotimi’s *If... A Tragedy of the Ruled* and *Hopes of the Living Dead* are reflective of people in multilingual societies whose diversity is exploited by corrupt leaders to perpetuate their nefarious activities in power. The attempt by Ola Rotimi is to bridge the linguistic divide so as to attain a utopian society by experimenting with multilingualism on the stage. Based on the use of literature to achieve national unity in a multi-lingual state, this paper examines how Ola Rotimi envisions social fusion and sustainable progress in a multi-lingual setting as reflected in *If, a tragedy of the ruled* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*.

Multi-Lingualism

Multilingualism represents a situation where an individual or society speaks more than two languages. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* defines multilingualism as “the ability to use three or more languages, either separately or in various degrees of code-mixing” (222). Gerda Mansour simply captures multilingualism as “communication through several languages” (1). A probable explanation for this is found in the *Holy Bible’s* account of the “confounding” of the existing language (tongue) at Babel (Genesis 11:4-9). Tracing the origin of language diversity to the story of the Tower of Babel, Einar Hangen concludes that “when men are separated by barriers of time and distance, their languages deviate in regular, if sometimes astonishing, ways” (1). In another account of the origin of linguistic diversity similar to that of Hangen, Ben Elugbe opines that “movements in time or in space or both result in language diversification” (44-45). The annexation of the geographical space of the region brought together people of varying

languages for the purpose of administration, leading to a complex system of multilingual language use. As long as literature reflects and mirrors life, it can be written to explicate virtually all human endeavours. Oftentimes, a piece of literary work could be expanded beyond the art-for-art's sake principle advocated by intrinsic approach favoured by New Criticism to the functional responsibility of investigating the sociopolitical life of the people. Penina Muhando Mlamba describes arts as “a mobilization and conscious raising tool” (14), submitting that theatre, among all other things, makes “a conscious attempt not only to bring to the fore the voice of the dominated classes, but also to involve them in a process of bettering their way of life” (20). Therefore, the effort made by Ola Rotimi in these texts to use literature as an instrument of national cohesion, most especially in a pluralistic cultural and linguistic environment, is commendable.

Adebite and Banjo have acknowledged that Nigeria is a multi-lingual nation, with an estimated 250 ethnic groups that speak over 400 languages (75; 90). Language issues, since the amalgamation of Southern and Northern Protectorates in 1914, have been tied to politics and thereby threatening the indivisible entity instituted by the colonialists. The political readings to language issues did not make the idea of evolving an indigenous language possible, following the description of the use of foreign languages as an extension of imperialism. This has been corroborated by A.D. de V. Cluver, citing Kelma, who pontificated that the selection of one of the many indigenous languages in a multilingual country “might lead to the domination of the other groups within, resulting tension that could lead to fragmentation” (48; 44). Such tensions are precipitated because of the attachment every individual has to his culture based on the view of Noam Chomsky who writes that the “alleged social factors in language use often

have a natural individualist-internalist interpretation” (32). All the political delineations in Nigeria since independence have been done across linguistic demarcations, leaving the nation with the uneasy idea of majority versus minority, and the idea of marginalization. This reechoes the nature of exclusion feared in using one of the languages in a multilingual nation, since according to Vic Webb and Kembo-Sure, “language has been a useful tool for the purposes of political manipulation, discrimination and exploitation” (8).

However, the adoption of ‘marginalization’ is a diversionary tactic to blur the view of unwary masses in unveiling the innocuous-looking but inimical activities of their leaders. It is commendable enough that different writers such as Ngugi, Soyinka, Achebe, Armah and others have painstakingly reflected the dismal performances of indigenous neo-imperialists who took over from their Western masters. With the investigations done by Gabriel Okara in *The Voice*, Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and with the redefinition of a nation-state given by them, the oppressed masses have been reoriented to forge a common front in order to challenge their arrogant ‘lords’.

The foregoing, therefore, reiterates the concept of the ‘empire writes back’ that permeates post-colonial discourse. Efforts have been made to investigate the various hybridizations that took place between the cultures of the center and that of the peripheries, mostly the act of what Wolfgang Iser calls “laying bare how knowledge and fantasy are superimposed on distant lands that are ruled by the metropolitan centre” (177). Obviously, the past subjugated knowledge, achieved by the imperialists, necessitated a contrapuntal reading in order to make bare the “new configurations of

culture, which Said takes pains to illuminate” (Iser 183). Making a reading of race and postcoloniality, Apollo Amoko posits that the latter “traces the vexed historical and enduring relationship between culture, race nationality and imperialism” (127) concluding that “the colonial encounter resulted in the consolidation of the idea of European or Western modernity at the apex of human civilization” (132). Language forms one of the enduring legacies the centre bequeathed to its former colonies, and what the latter has appropriated in the remapping of the past charted by the colonizers.

As part of the desperate moves to achieve decolonization, Frantz Fanon being the first proponent of anti-imperialism, has advocated that a flight away from one’s language is a departure from one’s culture, since the two are inseparable. Although attempts were made to replace the languages of the colonizers leading to the serious consequence of narrowed audiences, part of the new postcolonial readings, syncretism, has located the positive impact the imperialist language has on the literature of the peripheries. Tracing the origin of the word syncretism to comparative religion, Christopher B. Balme posits that theatrical syncretism is “the process whereby culturally heterogeneous signs and codes are merged together” (1). Analogous to what Ola Rotimi does in the two texts under study, Balme holds that “the emergence of post-colonial syncretism is thus a natural response to situations of multivocalism” (11) in order to reach a multilingual audience.

Literature and Multi-Lingual Society: Ola Rotimi's Position

By its characteristic nature, language can be used to construct and reconstruct identities based on the spatial location the user occupies at a point in time. However, some

measures of complexity arise because according to Oswald K. Ndoleriire, “the possession of a distinctively socio-cultural identity is possibly a non-negotiable and basic human need, with members of a particular group both unwilling and unable to relinquish their identity and to vanish into universal inconspicuousness” (284). The dual possibilities attributable to language are aptly captured by Robert K. Herbert who posits that

language has been used unconsciously to mark ‘social boundaries’. Language diversity acts at once, then, as a social resource (in shaping social action) and as a social problem (at the level of the nation-state) where linguistic diversity is often seen as a barrier to the integration of population. (2)

This is what Vic Webb and Kembo-Sure refer to as “the binding or separating function of language” (2). Nigeria becomes susceptible, naturally, to these disintegrating tendencies, being a multilingual nation. Ola Rotimi’s double extraction, with an Ijo mother and an Egba father, earns him what Reuben Abati calls “half Yoruba, half Ijaw” (16). In a collection of interviews with Anglophone African writers, Ola Rotimi enthuses that “my knowledge of the vernacular is miserable because I grew up in an ethnically heterogeneous family. My dad hails from Yorubaland, my late mother hailed from Ijaw in the Rivers State” (Lindfors 348). The position of Ola Rotimi on the use of colonial languages by writers from the empire quoted by Christopher Balme is instructive: “The real issue should not be *why* an African writer resorts to perpetuating a colonial tongue. Rather,...it should bear on *how* the writer uses that tongue to express the conditions and yearnings of his linguistically *diverse* peoples” (108).

Rotimi’s dual ethnicity, the socio-cultural and linguistic differences between his parents, and the concomitant problems of ethnicity and the need to foster cohesion amidst linguistic divisions, could have informed his promotion of social cohesion in the face of linguistic variations. He makes language the leading motif, as shown by his reliance on

the use of polyglots in *If* and *Hopes*. Reuben Abati sees this as using varieties of English language as a thread that may unite a country in diversity (40). Aside the fact that the English language has enhanced the sharp divisions that exist within people in these plays, it, at least, offers Ola Rotimi what Balme captures as the “growing political commitment as a result of the ethnic disputes in Nigeria, which are closely tied to issues of language and language status” (113).

Rotimi’s major concern in *If* and *Hopes* revolves around some emasculated or, in his words, ‘chosified’ individuals in the contemporary society. The setting of *If* involves certain depraved characters in a multi-tenanted building, whose lives the landlord ungraciously threatens with quit notices to secure their votes. The landlord becomes a signifier of the ruler in Nigerian nation struggling to make sense of multiplicity in political transition, towards achieving manipulation and exploitation. *Hopes* is a satire of a group of people whose ‘insignia’, leprosy, symbolizes poverty and deprivation in a society unknown to beautiful objects of experimentation.

Both *Hopes* and *If* are full of characters who could pride themselves on the leadership qualities of Papa and Whyte, respectively. However, *Hopes* is set in Port-Harcourt and has people analogous to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* surviving the malice of their oppressors as a result of collective revolt. In a similar vein, the unfortunate people in *If* are not lucky enough as they face the brutalization and dehumanization of the landlord that culminates in the death of Onyema, the beacon and symbol of hope, who should have enliven the struggle and precipitate the desired egalitarian society. The demise of Onyema is reminiscent of Wole Soyinka’s encapsulation of the wasted generation.

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Though reflective of the balkanization of Africa in colonial times, Nigeria's linguistic proliferation and physical splits, called state creation measures, have been exploited by the elite class to hold unfortunate people down in perpetual subjugation aimed at bringing back erstwhile political and economic violations of the pre-independence era. This is affirmed in the view of Martin Banham, reiterated by Balme that "the vulnerability amongst the patients that the authorities hoped to exploit was the diversity in their backgrounds and languages [...]. The parallel with the political unity of present day Nigeria is clear" (114). Rotimi therefore relives the consciousness that the literary artist uses his work as a veritable instrument for the liberation of the masses from all sorts of life-taking elements around them. One of the devices through which the 'haves' abuse the 'have nots' is the divide-and-rule method occasioned by the apparent linguistic plurality existing among them, and which invariably threatens to destroy mutual understanding. Ola Rotimi salvages the situation by bridging the gulf with the interpretation done in English to secure smooth interactions between the players and the audience to achieve what Vic Webb and Kembo-Sure say to the effect that "the role of the ex-colonial languages and the indigenous languages are complementary, not oppositional" (127).

Considering the pivotal role the sending and reception of codes play in communication, Rotimi realizes that the inability of the people to understand one another remains the only thing that consistently and tenaciously forces them apart. Ola Rotimi reflects on this when he declares that "the frightening ogre of tribalism stirs in almost every form of our national life. Politicians capitalize on this for partisan ends; labor is infested with it; even human relations are sometimes tinted by tribal bigotry" (Lindfors

349). To ensure communication, cohesion and mutual understanding in the face of this variegation Rotimi engages the use of interpreters in *If* and *Hopes* so as to educate people on the need to recognize their common enemies and fight them accordingly.

Rotimi's multi-tenanted building in *If* becomes the microcosm of Nigeria as a nation-state creating characters that represent the different geo-political zones that now form the basis of most discussions in Nigeria. These characters include Akpan, Chinwe and Dokubo from the East, Malam Garuba Kazaure and Dr Hamidu (alias Che Guevara) from the North, Banji and Betty from the West and Mid-West respectively. Apart from people such as Papa, Mama, Banji, Hamidu, and so on, who speak 'standard English', others such as Adiagha, Betty, Mama Rosa, Chinwe and the fisherman speak, according to Saint Gbilekaa, "either in their mother tongues, pidgin or simple everyday English" (169). The foregoing is evident of the use of language to achieve social distinction. English language is seen as the language of the elite class while the use of the indigenous language and pidgin is indicative of people who are peasants, petty traders and land workers. The use of language as a social marker is considered by Rajend Mesthrie et al who enthuse that language "is indexical of one's social class, status, region of origin, gender, age group and so on" (6).

More particularly, Rotimi relies on the service of Mama Rosa as a polyglot in *If* to amplify the repressed voice of the fisherman who could best articulate his plight by using Kalabari, understood only by a select few, mostly those in the murky water around him. Banji and other characters in *If* are expected to share the trouble of the fisherman with him. The fisherman is a symbol of a group of people in the Niger Delta area whose blessing has equally been a source of anguish. Their land is blessed with crude oil, which

is depleted and ‘impoverished’ in desperation by the multi-nationals to achieve economic aggrandizement without adequate palliative measures in the face of environmental degradation.

The exploration of crude petroleum leaves their water polluted thereby making it absolutely impossible to either engage in aquatic trading or get drinking water. This nefarious act is often done in collaboration with the government officials and their stooges, who embark on open or subtle extermination of ‘dissidents’, if possible. Analogous to this amplification of anguish and extermination are the activities and death of Ken Saro-Wiwa. Martin Banham reviewing the introduction of the Kalabari fisherman, believes that “Rotimi uses translation as a dramatic device and underlines the way in which language can be used to divide and rule” (715).

Rotimi’s intention in using this polyglot in *If* is to acquaint the ideologist Banji, and others, with the forces of exploitation and the need to be freed from that which Hamidu says has “gripped them in the stranglehold of an inguinal hernia” (*If* 16). The catalyst for change, according to Hamidu’s big IF, is the people’s votes on the one hand, and a mass struggle on the other, each of the measures being a product of mutual understanding and solidarity. Hamidu appears to speak the mind of Rotimi about what the latter preaches among ‘chosified’ individuals:

HAMIDU: [...] Which brings me to the final point. It has to do with the way Papa handled the Betty issues. Solidarity. The day our solidarity dissolved is the day our humanity ends, and our worthlessness begins. (*If* 16)

Similarly, Rotimi advocates a sense of physical and psychological display of togetherness among the invalids in *Hopes*, in the face of abandonment by the government and discrimination from the elite class. The case of linguistic multiplicity is made evident

since Whyte and Hanna speak Kalabari and English, Mallam speaks Hausa, Nweke uses Edo and English, Catechist converses in Ibibio and English, Dancer and Inmate relate by using only Ibibio and Edo respectively. Jimoh is fond of articulate good Yoruba while Mama Musi speaks Yoruba and what Ayo Banjo calls “a demotic form of English” (9), just as Alibo solely expresses his feeling by using Okrika. Saint Gbilekaa posits that “*Hopes* makes use of at least eight diverse Nigerian languages” (169).

In spite of this variegated linguistic milieu, Whyte, in a move characteristic of an ideal leader, strives to seek the participation and consent of the people in the decision making process as concerted efforts are similarly made to settle rifts exposed by the various interpretations of the existing polyglots. Apart from the essence of dramaturgy which this device stands to confer on Rotimi’s plays, it allows or every section of the Nigerian state to be maximally involved in things that affect their well-being. This participation has been referred to by Rotimi as, according to Gbilekaa, “ultra-realism,” and that “the attempt strives at reaching a wider cross-section of Nigerians who might be alienated by the use of a foreign language like English” (169). The experimentation with multilingualism on stage by Ola Rotimi smacks of sociopolitical significance which Christopher Balme claims is close to Brecht’s use of “the stage as an experimental preview of a better society” (115).

Considering the nature of the audience in a Nigerian theatre, emphasis is placed on the type of language a writer infuses his characters with. Therefore, as a result of the concern Rotimi has for the meaning Nigerian listeners make of his work based on language use, he declares in an interview with Dapo Adelugba that “the language should be simple and necessarily simple enough so that it would bounce on the plays [...]”, as a

result of this desire he continues that he has his “ears turned to linguistic vernacular phrases which conjure up beautiful images which one wouldn’t find in the drabness of our everyday English colloquialisms” (34-35).

Hopes is, therefore, Rotimi’s miniature representation of Nigeria as a multi-lingual nation fraught with dehumanizing and frustrating tendencies. The assertions made by Harcourt Whyte to the leprosy-ridden individuals succinctly re-echo Rotimi’s heart-felt desire:

HARCOURT WHYTE: Now, I want everybody to remember this. We all are part of this land. We are not fighting the people. We are fighting for the people. We are fighting for the simple things which everybody wants. The strong or the sick; Fulani or Ijo; man or woman; Yoruba or Ibibio: old and young, Hausa or Urobo; rich or poor, Kanuri or Ibo: everybody wants one thing in life [...]. (*Hopes* 58)

The above comment is a condemnation of the bulwarks built by political charlatans who always deprive the masses of life-giving measures only to perpetuate themselves as “saviours.” The divisions we have today, most especially across the linguistic line in contemporary Nigeria, are meant to bring ethnic sentiments into the relationship that exists among various groups of people from these regions.

Akanji Nasiru examines Rotimi’s preference for the use of the English language to reach different levels of his audience. He writes that Rotimi claims to handle the English language in his plays by striving to “temper its phraseology to the ear of both the dominant semi-literate as well as literate classes” with a view to getting “assimilation and clarity in identification” (22).

Examining Rotimi’s *If* and *Hopes*, Gbilekaa also recognizes the need for grassroots participation and submits that “Rotimi has planted polyglots who convey to the

monolingual dramatic personages of these two plays what is being discussed to obtain their own views” (169). In another vein, Reuben Abati holds that “language became an interesting tool” in *If* and *Hopes* where Rotimi “deployed varieties of English to probe thoughts and define situation and character, and again, to reflect the diversity of the Nigerian nation and the common threads that unite us” (40).

Conclusion

We have been informed of the complimentary role the English language plays in a multilingual society where it is viewed as a vestige of imperialism. The language has offered itself as an instrument through which the periphery reflects on its sociopolitical precarious situation often exploited by corrupt leaders. By experimenting with multilingualism on stage with the use of an interpreter, all shades of people that constitute the audience are well reached and informed. Christopher Balme submits that in “Rotimi’s view the use of the colonial language has certain advantages in terms of mutual understanding in a linguistically heterogeneous country like Nigeria” and therefore the deployment of multilingualism on stage “is not just a dramaturgical device but is rather an integral part of the political message of the play(s) that linguistic diversity does not automatically exclude political unity and cooperation” (114). Rotimi’s *If...A Tragedy of the Ruled* and *Hopes of the Living Dead* are a recreation of the multi-lingual Nigerian state where the only forms of panacea to push oppression, dehumanization and frustration to the background are togetherness, unity in diversity, and solidarity, even in the face of linguistic plurality.

Rotimi’s dramaturgy and vision are closely linked in the two plays. The

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playwright seems to believe in the survival of a multi-ethnic Nigerian nation, but the dehumanized and frustrated characters warn his readers not to be foolishly optimistic. Unlike the epic and romantic values that characterize Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, *If* and *Hopes* smack of satire, comedy and farce. The varying problems associated with multilingualism have been made bare, even as a concerted effort is made to achieve creative reconstruction and political mobilization of the masses in the face of the bourgeoisie's infiltration and onslaught. For once, the language of the ex-colonizer is used to pull together the chunks of the depleted past of the periphery in fostering the realization of an ideal nation using the stage as the spring-board.

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