



**AFRICAN DRAMATISTS AS HISTORIANS;
DELE CHARLEY'S *THE BLOOD OF A STRANGER* AS AN HISTORICAL
REVOLUTIONARY DRAMA**

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Abstract

Revolutions have occurred throughout human history and they vary in terms of duration, methods and motivating ideologies. Their results include major changes in culture, economy and socio-political institutions. This contribution looks into how Africans were colonized by the whites and being assisted in achieving their devilish act by some unscrupulous African leaders. This paper therefore probes into literature to examining the historical connection between Dele Charley's *The Blood of a Stranger* and the background of Sierra Leon. It also exposes the deceptive ways of the whites who came to Africa not because they wanted to civilize the people of Africa through education, religions, commerce, etc as they have claimed, but only to make away with their natural endowments such as gold, cocoa, timber, petroleum, etc. as they have done in some part of Sierra Leon with their (Sierra Leoneans') alluvia diamonds. Content analysis and library research method were adopted in processing the evaluation of the primary text as an historical revolutionary drama against colonialism and neocolonialism. Historical approach to literature; an approach of evaluation by critic in looking beyond literature itself to the broader historical and cultural event that may influence the author's work serves as the theoretical guild of this paper. The evaluation therefore focuses on the issue of combating colonialism and neo-colonialism as an African historical artifact. This paper concludes by illuminating the selected text and appropriating it as a tool of historical flashback as Dele Charley's way of bringing past events into commemoration.

Keywords: Dramatist, Historian, African, Revolutionary.

Introduction

Drama can simply be seen as an act of presenting, representing or imitating an action to a specific audience; either to entertain, inform or educate. Drama is an act of imitation which also means action as De Luca, Grillo, Pace and Ranzoli define it as a word of Greek origin meaning “action” and referring to a performance on the stage in which actors act out the events and characters a story (224).

Milton also explains drama further as:

A composition, in prose or poetry, accommodated to action and intended to exhibit a picture of human life, or to depict a series of grave or humorous actions of more than ordinary interest, tending toward some striking result. It is commonly designed to be spoken and represented by actors on stage.

Drama is the imitation of life, it mirrors the society, that is, the society looks and observes itself, appraises itself and reinforces accepted values as well as condemns the unaccepted ones as Owoeye posits in *A Short Introduction to Literature* that “Its dynamic nature derives from the dynamism of a man and his world which it strives to imitate in a defined and controlled form”

(6)

Drama has grown not only to become a means of entertainment, but also as a means of getting the society educated, enlightened and corrected, that is educating the society in knowing what is right from wrong, to bring sanity back into a communal insanity, to bring justice back to a society where injustice is the order of the day, to bring remedies to a dystopian society, and also to bring historical events back to remembrance. The most meaningful asset a dramatist may possess is the ability to influence his followers and his society through his/her work of art. A dramatist who possesses such ability will have an unlimited joy when he/she discovers that one way or the other; his/her play has an impact on people’s life and in their communities.

This paper seeks to explore the dramatist as an historian using Dele Charley's *The Blood of a Stranger* as an example of historical African revolutionary drama that brings us to the remembrance of the whites' exploitation of some African countries and how their exploitation was rejected through revolutionary means. The play has its setting in the village of Mando, old Sierra Leone during the colonial era. This is the period when the white men came to Africa with religion, education, commerce and civilization as they have claimed, and started exploiting the Blackman's resources (Charley, 14).

This paper shall also make reference to how the playwright (Dele Charley) used his play as a revolutionary African historical drama by exposing the relationship between the play and what transpired during the First World War (1914-1918) in Sierra Leone. Revolutionary African drama is more often a protest against, and denouncement of oppression manifested through exploitation, poverty, deprivation of right, practice of social injustice, dehumanization and other principles employed by the practitioners of colonialism and neo-colonialism. As it has been in some other parts of Africa such as South Africa, where dramatists like Athol Fugad and some others fight against apartheid through their plays and performances, Kenya where Ngugi Wa Thiong'O and the likes fight against imperialism and oppression. This is why so many of the African plays and performances during and after the colonial era are often referred to as protest play or protest theatre.

The term revolution was derived from the Latin word "Revolucio" which means a "turnaround".

Revolution according to Allan Todd is a situation whereby:

People attempt to completely transform the social, economic, political, and ideological features of their society. Unlike reform or revolt, it is no longer a question of simply passing or repealing some specific laws in order to make an improvement or right a wrong..

Revolution – as opposed to revolt – tends to occur when situations are begging to improve, rather than when poverty and oppression are becoming more severe. (2)

This is why revolutionaries are the most determined fighters of reforms, combating against oppression and decadence of any form. This is because they understand that poor or deteriorating conditions produce demoralization and apathy among the masses. Revolution is an attempt to change a specific status quo of a decadent society and replace it with a better system.

The *Encyclopedia Americana* defines revolution as:

A struggle, more or less stressful and completely accomplished in which the ruling power of a country passes from one economic class or political group to another class or group (1979-445)

Revolution is the most extreme but necessary social alternative taken when other options or avenues to achieve reform have been exhausted. It is meant to arouse consciousness of man with the revolutionary ideology. It helps man to understand, master his environment and fashion it to serve humanity better. Revolution is however regarded as the choice between two alternatives: humanization and dehumanization. Of these two, man's choice is clear, but the choice is constantly neglected through injustice, exploitation, oppression and brutality of the oppressors. Revolution is not an easy thing to come about because it does not come easily. Most of the times, it is always accompanied with violence which may in one way or the other lead to bloodshed in the society. Revolution, as its root meaning indicates, shows that the table cannot turn easily because the oppressors have their delight in oppression while the oppressed wants a change of status. This is what we shall be looking into in this research paper as the history of Sierra Leone has to do with Oppressors and the Oppressed.

Theoretical Framework

Historical approach to literature is an approach of evaluation by critic in evaluating a work of literature beyond the work itself to the broader historical and cultural event that may influence the author's work. Historical Criticism according Surabhi and Yamini can be seen as:

Criticism in the light of historical evidence or based on the context in which a work was written, including facts about the author's life and the historical and social circumstances of the time. This is in contrast to other types of criticism, such as textual and formal, in which emphasis is placed on examining the text itself while outside influences on the text are disregarded.

Historical approach to literary work is a theory that enhances a critic, trying to understand a particular work of literature or critique historically, by looking beyond the work itself by going further to the broader landscape of historical and cultural event that might influence, trigger, or motivate the author whose work is considered. In other words, Historical approach is one of the method to evaluate and appraise a literary work in which the author and the reader understand the message of the literary work by bringing into recollection some moment/historical moment a long with the literary work of arts written.

In historical analysis of a work, the author's cultural background is looked into for broader understanding of his experience which must have influenced the work in one way or the other because writers are bound to write in accordance with their experience which means a literary work of arts cannot be written in intelligence and experience isolation. It is imperative that a historical critic looks beyond the work of arts to fully interpret the work for posterity and credibility sake.

There are two major types of historical approach to literature, which are;

Old Historicism: explains literary works in terms of the "influence" of history upon them. This influence might take the shape of wars, social upheavals or equally cultural traditions. An Old Historicist therefore would ask such questions of a work as: What are the author's political inclinations? Do we see any reflections on historical events in this work? What aspects of culture are important to this work? These questions would identify the influence of history on the production of the work.

New Historicism: starts off from debating the concept of history and knowledge by asking how we receive our knowledge of history and questioning its veracity as an objective fact. New Historicism therefore argues that what we call "history" is not necessarily "true", but that history is actually a narrative which will exclude some event and characters just as much as it will include others. New Historicism therefore identifies oppressed voices and allows them to have their say in history. These oppressed voices might be women, or working class, or ethnic minorities (such as slaves). New Historicists go beyond this, however, by arguing that, like Old Historicists, all texts are formed by history. The crucial difference lies in that New Historicists believe that the history that influences texts is likewise, only just another text that needs to be interpreted and probed.

The Historical Sketch of Sierra Leon at a Glance

Sierra Leone became an inhabited place to live by indigenous African people like 2,500 years ago. The dense tropical forest partially isolated the region from other West African cultures, and it became a refuge for people who escape violence and Jihads. Sierra Leone was named by a Portuguese explorer, Pedro de Sintra, who mapped the region in 1462. The Freetown estuary

provided a good natural harbour for ships to shelter and replenish drinking water, and gained more international attention as coaster and trans-Atlantic trade supplanted trans-Saharan trade.

In the mid-16th century, the Mane people invaded, subjugated nearly all the indigenous coaster people, and militarized Sierra Leone. The mane soon blended with the local populations and the various chiefdoms and kingdoms remained in a continual state of conflict, with many captives sold to European slave-traders the Atlantic slave trade had a significant impact on Sierra Leone, as this trade flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries, and later as a centre of anti-slavery efforts when the trade was abolished in 1807. British abolitionists had organized a colony for Black Loyalists at Freetown, and this became the capital of British West Africa. A Naval squadron was based there to intercept slave ships, and the colony quickly grew as liberated Africans were released, joined by West Indian and African soldiers who had fought for Britain in the Napoleonic Wars. The descendants of the black settlers were collectively referred to as the Creole or Krios.

During the colonial era, the British and Creoles increased their control over the surrounding area, securing peace so that commerce would not be interrupted, suppressing slave-trading and inter-chiefdom war. In 1895, Britain drew borders for Sierra Leone which they declared to be their protectorate, leading to armed resistance and the Hut Tax War of 1898. Thereafter, there was dissent and reforms as the Creoles sought political rights, trade unions formed against colonial employers, and peasants sought greater justice from their chiefs.

Sierra Leone has played a significant part in modern African political liberty and nationalism. In the 1950s, a new constitution united the Crown Colony and Protectorate, which had previously been governed separately. Sierra Leone gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1961 and became a member of the Commonwealth of Nations. Ethnic and linguistic divisions remain

an obstacle to national unity, with the Mende, Temne and Creoles as rival power blocs. Roughly half of the years since independence have been marked by autocratic government or civil war.

The Sierra Leone Civil War

The Sierra Leone Civil War took place between 1991 to 2002 is an eleven years war that began on 23rd March, 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), with support from the special forces of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), intervened in Sierra Leone in an attempt to overthrow the Joseph Momoh government. The result of the war enveloped the country and left over 50,000 dead.

During the first year of the war, the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) took control of large swathes of territory in the eastern and western Sierra Leon, which were rich in alluvia diamonds [<https://en.wikipedia.org>]. The RUF is a loosely organized force that fought an eleven-year civil war to seize control of the lucrative diamond-producing regions of the country. The group found itself largely through the extraction and sales of diamonds obtained in areas of Sierra Leone under its control. They invaded Sierra Leon for what they originally said was for politics and to make life better for the people of Sierra Leon, but reverse is the case because their original intention is to rob them (Sierra Leon) of their diamonds by capitalizing on their ignorance as Dele Charley has been able to unveiled in his play text *The Blood of a Stranger...*

Examples of African Dramatists as Historians

Dramatists also known as Playwrights are people who write plays or drama and sometimes put them on performance in a theatrical space, while Historians are people who bring past events into remembrance. In Africa, we have so many dramatists such as Femi Osofisan, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Athol Fugard, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Wale Ogunyemi, and others. So many of these dramatists have committed themselves to bringing into remembrance what has happened

in the past in their environment, by revealing the good deeds and bad deeds of some people involved in unforgettable incidents as Ngugi has exhibited in his play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* to reveal the history of the life of Dedan Kimathi, a rebel leader who leads the MauMau uprising against the oppressive government of Kenya who was tried several times without numbers, and later was beheaded.

Femi Osofisan, through his play *Morountodun* in *Morountodun and other Plays*, uses the play in bringing to the remembrance of his audience the legendary life of Moremi of Ile Ife who risks her life by going on a suicide mission great men of Ife then could not dare, in order for her to save her home town. She gets herself captured by enemy just for her to be a spy and know the major source of their power in which she achieves and delivers the enemy into the hands of her people. Her legendary life cannot be forgotten easily because she commits her life to save her people from danger. Through the play, Femi Osofisan played the role of a dramatist historian as a dramatist.

Athol Fugard, a South African dramatist uses his *Siwe Banzi is Dead* to exemplify the apartheid system of government with the way the blacks are oppressed by the whites. Then in South Africa, the blacks are deprived of so many rights in their fatherland; the blacks cannot live where the whites are living and the blacks can only work like a slave worker because they don't have access to any official or white collar job. All they do to survive is menial jobs and they can be fired anytime. There are lots of restrictions for the white. The play was written at the time when it was required that all black and coloured citizens of South Africa above the age of sixteen should carry identity book that restricted employment and movement within the country.

Wole Soyinka, a prolific Nigerian dramatist has been able to bring to the back to the remembrance of his audience what the culture of the Yoruba people look like in the Oyo empire in the olden days with his play *Death and the King Horseman* which explains the cultural belief

of the Yorubas that whenever a king dies, a horseman must also die with him and some slaves in which he will be sending on errands in the world beyond. Soyinka has proved beyond doubt that he is indeed an historian.

Ola Rotimi and Wale Ogunyemi both have similar ideology as historian dramatists, because they share some things in common through their plays *Kurunmi* and *Ijaye* respectively. Tunji Azeem sees Rotimi and Ogunyemi as:

Writers with keen interest in the Yoruba history and culture as evident in their works. They employ such elements as song, music, dance and riddles of the Yoruba people so much that their plays appeals to all sundry irrespective of academic background or social class. (103)

Through Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Wale Ogunyemi's *Ijaye*, the two playwrights succeeded in establishing the historical account of Alafin of Oyo who wants his son to be crowned as king after his death which is against the custom and tradition of the Oyo empire. Kurunmi who is the generalissimo *Are Ona Kakanfo* kicks against it and this leads to a battle between Kurunmi and Oyo empire which leads to the death of Kurunmi.

Kindo as an example of African Revolutionary Character

A revolutionary character is that kind of character that has the ability, attribute and strength of coordinating, sensitizing, enlightening and intimating people who are suffering from the shackle of oppression to stand to their feet, take their destiny into their hands and fight for their right. Even when the road to revolution is rough as Femi Osofisan has named one of his plays *Red is the Freedom Road* in *Morountodun and other Plays*, a revolutionary character does not give up. No matter how difficult the situation may be. A revolutionary character will always be ready to sacrifice even his/her life for the cause of the struggle to freedom.

In every society that has experienced imperialism, colonialism, and oppression, and later agitate for freedom and attain their freedom from the shackle of oppression, there must have been a brain behind the success of the revolution which is the revolutionary character, who shows the true colour of leadership to lead his people to freedom by sensitizing them to take their destiny into their hands and fight for their rights through his words and actions of engagement and encouragement. This is the attribute Kindo exhibits in the play *The Blood of a Stranger*, as he always tries to sensitize the king of the evil he senses in the coming of the white man and also how he attacks Maligu with words thus;

MALIGU: You must be a dog with an eager nose.

KINDO: (*Acidly*) Yes, to smell out untrustworthy cats like you. (44)

Kindo shows beyond a reasonable doubt that he is indeed an African revolutionary character as other African Dramatists will always present their revolutionary character as we shall look into few of them.

There have always been struggling against oppression in almost every part of Africa since the colonial era to the post colonial era, when new form of colonialism was introduced to Africa (Neo-Colonialism) which means that exploitation does not only happened in Sierra Leon. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O and Micere Crithae Mugo also expose the experience of Kenyans in oppression and exploitation from their white colonial master and their unscrupulous black leaders with the speech of Kimathi in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*;

I would say: If I die today

Will this bloodshed ever be betrayed? That was my Trial. But now I know that for every traitor there are a thousand of patriots.

... But our people will never surrender. Internal and external foes will be demolished and Kenya shall be free (83)

Just like Dedan Kimathi, Akanji in Femi Osofisan's *Red is the Freedom Road* is also presented as an African revolutionary character. A character, which gears up the spirit of resistance in the

heart of the oppressed and leads them from the claw of oppression, suppression and depression to freedom as his speeches show:

... We shall fight our way to freedom. The gods you speak of are in your muscles! Surrender is in your willing, not in magic. I offer you freedom, but only to man who can beat their chest. (p. 131)

Mother, I have come... I have come as you have ordered. I have set our men free. Look! They are dancing. They are rulers now. (p. 137)

As Kimathi leads his people to freedom, Akanji also leads his people to freedom. The same quality features in the character of Kindo, the character of sensing danger of imperialism, oppression and exploitation which he kicks against. In so many ways, revolutionary characters know that the way to freedom is always very rough, but without considering the negative outcome the struggle can have on them, they will still carry on to the extent that some of them even lose their lives in the process. Akanji loses his life eventually in the course of the struggle but he achieves freedom;

AKANJI: Mother, into your arms I come (Falls on his face into the water, with only his legs showing.)

IBIDUN: Akanji, my husband,

DOYIN: He is dead (Osofisan, 137)

Kimathi also makes a sacrifice of being in prison for a longer period of time facing so many trials of imperialists as he says during a trial in Ngugi's *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*;

In the court of imperialism! There has never be and will never be justice for the people... (p. 82)

Kindo, the revolutionary character of *The Blood of a Stranger* just like the above characters is also not left out in the revolutionary sacrifice because a revolutionary character is a character that will never resign to fate no matter how difficult and enormous the challenges may be. He achieves his aim of preventing his people from entering into the shackle of oppression and exploitation by killing Parker, and despite being punished by banishing from his own village as the rightful heir to the throne and a warlord, he still completes his mission by killing Whitehead

and leaves the village with his warriors after he exposes the evil plan of Soko, Maligu and Whitehead to the villagers.

The Blood of a Stranger as an Historical Play

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, Dele Carley's *The Blood of a Stranger* is not just a play for entertainment. It is a play that brings to present a long time occurrence of colonialism, imperialism and exploitation, when the whites exploit and rob the blacks of their natural wealth. This has already been exemplified in the life of Mr. Whitehead when he enters into the village of Mando. Dele Charley successfully makes this play eye opener by making his reader/audience have a full understanding of what exploitation is. Exploitation according to *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary* (8th Edition) is "a situation in which somebody treats somebody else in an unfair way, especially in order to make money from their work". (2015:516)

According to the historical records of Sierra Leon, Sierra Leon has once been under the exploitation of the whites who deceitfully visit their land in the name of politics, education, and so on, whereas their real intention is to rob them of their natural deposit. Dele Charley has not only exhibit the character of Whitehead for entertainment but for a deep relationship with how the whites exploit the Africans on their own [blacks] fatherland. They have not come as devils or wicked souls, but they come as friends (wolves in sheep clothing) just like Mr. Whitehead in this play, hiding their true intention. They promise infrastructural developments, good roads, electricity, education, civilization and so on, just as Mr. Whitehead promises to make a tobacco plantation, build a school and help the village of Mando whereas his intention is to have the farmers unknowingly harvest the diamonds, which is the wealth of the village, for him. This exactly exemplifies how White men capitalize on the ignorance of some African countries, most especially Sierra Leon to exploit them of their wealth as ensued in a conversation between Whitehead and Maligu:

WHITEHEAD; ...Maligu, I am telling you this part of my plan because I trust you and I need you. Have you heard about diamonds?

MALIGU: I have read about them, Mr. Whitehead, but... I have never seen diamonds.

WHITEHEAD: You have them here

MALIGU: We have them here?

WHITEHEAD: Yes. That is why I am here.

MALIGU: But you are here to plant tobacco.

WHITEHEAD: That is what everybody has been made to believe. There are diamonds in the stream and in the place near tobacco farm. The people has never seen a diamond, so you will tell them before they begin to dig that there are many evil stones in that place. Each one they find must be put into a special jug... (p. 89-90)

This callous act will not have been possible if not for the cooperation of some ruthless leaders who does not think of the future of their people, but only think of their personal selfish interest.

These are people like Maligu and Soko. Dele Charley brings to us an occurrence of the past through *The Blood of a Stranger* of how the whites has come to the land of Sierra Leon with the help of some selfish leaders to rob them of their natural wealth which is alluvia diamonds because Sierra Leon is known for their wealth in diamonds. Having known this, the RUF takes control of eastern and southern Sierra Leon in order to have access to their diamonds and make themselves rich through that.

Conclusion

The above discussion has been devoted to the evaluation of Dele Charley's *The Blood of a Stranger*. The play has been examined and evaluated as an historical African revolutionary drama as the author has presented it. The play has been analyzed, not only from the historical point of the play, but as a revolutionary historical drama. While being careful, references have been made to historical accounts; such references are not just for making purpose, but to buttress the view of the dramatist on his play. The author however, has in this medium shown how the dramatist, Dele Charley dramatizes the reasons why an individual or group of people have to stand to their feet, take their destiny into their hands and fight for their rights.

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