

INTERROGATING PLOT STRUCTURE, THEMES, LANGUAGE, TECHNIQUES AND STYLE IN OLA ROTIMI'S *IF ... A TRAGEDY OF THE RULED*.

By

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Abstract

In dramatic literature, plot structure, themes, language, techniques, and style are critical components that communicate the playwright's thoughts, intentions, and social vision to the audience. It is on this note that the researcher deems it imperative to critically interrogate the uses of plot elements, thematic thrust, language, and, of course, techniques and style deployed in Ola Rotimi's *If... A Tragedy of the Ruled*. In achieving the aim and objectives of this work, the researcher employs secondary data analysis, drawing on scholarly journals, textbooks, newspapers, magazines, and internet sources, among others. The work also uses Marxist and conflict theories as pivots of analysis. The work revealed that playwrights should pay adequate attention to plot structure, themes, language, techniques, and styles as mechanisms that help to highlight and communicate their message to the audience in order to enhance enlightenment, information, and entertainment for society.

Keywords: Drama, theatre, plot/plot structure, theme, language, style and technique.

Introduction

It is obvious to state that drama is a veritable platform that interrogates socio-political realities, as evidenced in human society. Furthermore, it is noted that "drama is a specific mode of fiction represented in performance. The term comes from a Greek word meaning 'action', which is derived from the verb meaning 'to do' or 'to act'. Drama, as a literary and performative genre, serves as an agent of socialisation and propaganda. In this connection, literary artistes and, by extension, dramatists have queried the excesses inherent in society through the instrumentality of drama.

Among various renowned dramatists in Nigeria and Africa, Ola Rotimi, stands out as a writer whose works are consistently anchored on issues of bad governance, collective responsibility and power struggle. In *If ... A Tragedy of the Ruled*, Rotimi critically explores the dynamics between leadership and followership in contemporary postcolonial African setting. Judging by issues of disenchantment and an arbitrary loss of hope by the citizens in society, with emphasis on leadership

gaps, Rotimi interrogates the immediate and remote causes of bad governance in Nigerian society. He satirises issues of political corruption, electoral malpractice and other social problems that deter rapid progress in the Nigerian nation. In the play, Ola Rotimi exposes the emotional and psychological trauma that the less privileged undergo in the process of socio-economic survival and self-actualisation.

It is worthy of note to state that in the dramatic genre, a playwright uses dialogue and actions to communicate his or her intention, thought, idea and social vision to the audience (society). In addition, the plot structure, themes, language, techniques and style must be explicitly established as mechanisms of communication. This is because a dramatic work without a plot is likened to a building without a solid foundation. It is in line with the foregoing assertion that Aristotle defined and presented the plot as, *the soul of drama* (tragedy). In the same direction, a work of art must be copiously appreciated and communicated to the audience through its thematic thrust. The playwright's philosophical thought is always made known through the instrumentality of theme(s), followed by the language, techniques and styles of presentation. Therefore, Rotimi's *If ... A Tragedy of the Ruled* anchors its dramatic importance on the structural presentation of the dramatic events and action, as well as other sundry factors inherent in the play. It is on this note that this paper attempts to carefully interrogate the plot structure, themes, language, dramatic techniques and styles engaged in the play under review.

The Synopsis of the Play

Set in contemporary Nigerian society, the play presents a dramatic exploration of political corruption and bad governance in postcolonial African society. The play presents a paradox of the Nigerian nation, where the bourgeoisie (ruler) and the proletariat (ruled) will always be antagonised based on their interests of power, class struggle and economic survival. It is on the rising, uncontrollable oppression and intimidation of the ruling class against the ruled that the playwright appeals for the masses to use their votes to remove the corrupt leaders from office. The playwright also advocates for an uprising should the leaders continue to oppress the masses.

Theoretical Framework

It is expected that a study as this, should be anchored on relevant theoretical framework. It is in the light of the above that the work anchors on Marxist literary theory and sociological theories of power resistance as a roadmap for critical analysis of the topic under study.

Marxist Literary Theory:

The Marxist literary theory is propounded by Karl Marx (1818), a German philosopher, political economist and socialist who spoke about the working class deprived of their rights, the exploitation of the working class, and the capitalistic mode of production. He divided the society into two parts: Bourgeois and Proletarians, in which Bourgeois are represented as the owners of means of production and Proletarians as the working class. The theory centres on discussing literature as a reflection of material conditions and thus, class struggle is inherent in society. Marxist literary theory elucidates the class struggle between the bourgeoisie (rulers) and the proletariat (the ruled) in human socio-economic life. This theory is germane to this work as it examines the dichotomy between the ruling class and the oppressed masses as dramatised in the play, *If... A Tragedy of the Ruled*.

Sociological Theory of Power:

As a social drama that discusses and ridicules social realities, it is apropos to employ sociological theory as a pivot of critical analysis of the topic under review. Therefore, Michel Foucault's sociological theory of power emphasises the notion that power is diffuse and incorporated within the ambit of social relations rather than the understanding of the interactions between the rich and the poor masses. Michel Foucault, one of the most important figures in critical theory, has been the centre of attraction on the concepts of power, knowledge, and discourse. His influence is perceptible in post-structuralist, post-modernist, postfeminist, post-Marxist and post-colonial theories. Ola Rotimi's *If... A Tragedy of the Ruled* dramatises the inherent power and control of the ruling class against the oppressed masses. In the course of analysing the play, we shall, in sufficient detail, appreciate the phenomena of power and authority in the actions and deeds of the characters and situations presented in the play.

Dramatic Plot Structure:

The plot of a literary work refers to the logical arrangement of events in a work of art. It is a logical structuring of events in a work of art which must obey the law of causality (cause and effect). It is a term sometimes used to mean a summary of a play's story. By plot structure, we mean the external and internal arrangement of events in a play. External plot structure is the physical or the visual arrangement of events in a play. In this instance, therefore, the entire plot structure is visually perceived as physical presentation of events in a play. (for example, the demarcation of dramatic events into acts and scenes among others). On the contrary, however, the internal plot structure is intellectually perceived. Its technicality implies that dramatic actions unfold from exposition through the climax and, to the resolution.

For the purpose of clarification, it is important to state that dramatic structure refers to the framework that underpins a narrative; outlining how a story unfolds through its various components. Essentially, it is a key element of drama. Onyemaechi Udumukwu defined plot as "the element that enables the writer of narrative fiction or drama to achieve or impose a specific order or pattern on language and on life". (1997, p. 18). It is on this note that he described plot as "the soul of a work of fiction or play". According to Crane, a plot is "the temporal synthesis is effected by the writer of the element of action, character and thought that constitute the matter of his invention" (Crane cited in Udumukwu 1997, p. 18). Having given a brief definition of plot, we shall delve into analysing the plot structure in *If... in detail*.

External Plot Structure in *If...*: An Interrogation

The external plot structure in *If ...* is presented in the following order:

Friday Evening	-	Happenings I
Happenings II		
Happenings III		
Saturday Evening	-	Happenings IV
Happenings V		
Sunday Evening	-	Happenings VI

Brief Summary of Happenings in the Play

Happenings I : Happenings I takes place on Friday evening. Here, the play opens in an expository note introducing some characters like Woman I, Woman II, Betty, etc. In these happenings, we were made to understand that the landlord requested the tenants to pay a new rent increment of N30.00. This is made known through the letter written by the landlord and given to Betty to deliver to some tenants. In this case, the tenants called for a meeting, resolving that they will not pay the new increment. This happening also tells us about Mama's ill health and how she should be taken to Lagos Teaching Hospital for prompt medical attention.

Happenings II: Happenings II discusses the problem between Akpan and his wife. And how Akpan could not provide feeding money for his family but instead engages his money in buying books. Again, this happening also talks about Onyema and his poor school friend, Kalada. Here, Onyema provides money for Kalada to enable him to pay his school fees.

Happenings III: This happening discusses Akpan and his drunken friend. The happening takes place at night. It is at this point in the play that Akpan confronts Chinwe and Betty. The happenings also reveal the doctor who brings drugs for Onyema, as he also advises Chinwe to take good care of Onyema's health.

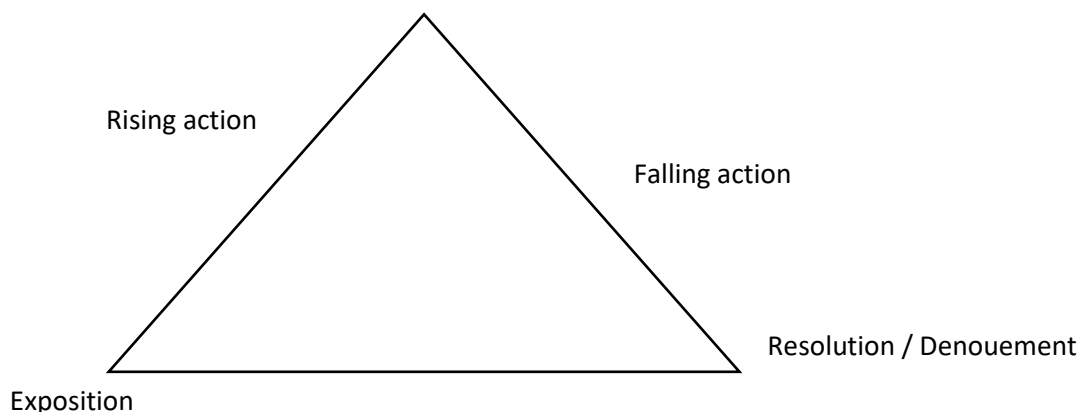
Happenings IV: These happenings talk about Mama's birthday/wedding anniversary. Here, gifts were given to Mama from guests, including the landlord. But Garuba makes a jest of the landlord's gift. He was embarrassed and assaulted. This singular act makes him call the police and thugs for Garuba. In a bid to show solidarity, Betty and Onyema try to stop Garuba from being arrested. The landlord charges the policemen to arrest Garuba and take him to the station as Garuba is thoroughly beaten.

Happenings V: Happening V reveals Onyema lying on the ground helplessly. It is at this point that the election results were announced, revealing that the Patriotic People's Party (PPP) won 40 seats in the senatorial position. In this direct, Mama could not travel due to the fact that the party was to celebrate the victory. Therefore, all domestic flights were suspended as they were engaged in carrying the party faithful for the celebration. In the end, Onyema could not be taken to the hospital due to the absence of a car at that critical period at midnight.

Happenings VI: This last happening reveals the tragic elements in the play wherein Papa is visibly seen unhappy due to the fact Mama could not be taken to the hospital. Again, Onyema's funeral procession is observed in these happenings. His friend, Kalada, comes in sorrowfully and dejected as he sympathises with the death of Onyema.

Internal Plot Structure in *If...*: An Explanation

The internal plot structure is intellectually perceived. It is the “life wire” of events in dramaturgy. It moves from the beginning through the middle and to the end. It is otherwise called the Freytag Triangle (Pyramid). This triangle is named after the German critic Gustav Freytag. It is indeed a heuristic device for representing the plot structure of a work of art. The plot consists of the following elements, such as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement (resolution).



Exposition: It is the establishment of the situation within which the account unfolds. In *If...*, the exposition starts in happenings I, when woman I engages woman II in a hair plaiting exercise. The exposition also helps to establish the characters and subject matter. Here, we notice that the landlord wants the tenants to pay the new rent increment. And Mama's ill health is vividly

established in these happenings. The exposition of these characters and issues gave rise to the conflict in the play.

Point of attack: It could be defined as those points when dramatic action begins. In the play, this is established when Papa invites Betty to join the rest of the neighbours in discussing the issues associated with the letter.

Papa says, 'Join us then...' Now, what I want to say first is simply this: we must let the landlord know that we all here are one. If because we refuse to take oaths to vote for him in the coming election, this now is his way of punishing us; fair enough. But let him punish all of us... (p. 13).

Conflict: It is the disagreement between two opposing forces. In *If...* the conflict is established when Betty hands the letter to Adiagha-Akpan's wife. This is revealed through the dialogue between Hamidu and Akpan thus:

Hamida: What is it?

Akpan: Quit notice... (p. 13)

Climax: This is the apex or the highest point of tension in a work of art. It could also be called the crescendo. In the play, Mama's wedding anniversary cum birthday party heightens the actions and situations in the play. At this point, Landlord comes in to give Mama a present.

Landlord: Mama, I hear today is your birthday, so I've brought this token gift. Eh... I'm sorry I'm a bit late, but I'm sure you all know how busy I've been – the political campaigns and then the voting which began this morning and all that, which reminds me... voting ends at 6 – which gives you what? 25 more minutes (*If...* p. 63).

Discovering: Discovering brings knowledge or light into the play. It also brings some relief into the tension. In the play, we discovered that Mama could not go to hospital due to the celebration of the victorious election result. In dramaturgy, it is important to note that discovering leads to recognition.

Recognition: It is the point of moving from ignorance to awareness. It must be noted that in a gross capitalist state, the bourgeoisie controls the activities of the proletariats. This is noticed in the play where the politicians (have) influenced and controlled the activities of the “have-nots”. We also recognised that no matter how Chinwe, Betty, Papa, Akpan, etc. protest, they are indeed under the mercy of the landlord. The landlord detects the condition for his house rent against the wish of the tenants. In the end, he succeeded in winning the elections and subjected his tenants to untold suffering and death.

Reversal: This is the movement to the opposite direction. Kalada hopes to go to college with his friend Onyema, but his hope is aborted as Onyema drops dead. And all hope is lost. Here, Kalada remembers his last conversation with Onyema and says: “I want it! I want it... chie! Onyema...! You do well. O! Bye... bye” (p. 83).

Resolution: It is a point when the two opposing forces resolve their problems. Put directly, the conflicts in the play were not resolved. Everything ended with the death of Onyema. The problem between the landlord and the tenants is not yet resolved as Mama is still ill.

Themes in the Play

A theme is the central message in a work of art. It is also the idea or thought which the artiste wants to pass to the audience. A **theme** is the inferred stance taken on the central topic or message of a story. Themes are used to communicate important ideas and messages about issues that face the characters and the setting of a narrative. Everything that happens within a story should reference back to a theme. It is observed that a theme is a universal idea, lesson, or message explored throughout a work of literature. One key characteristic of literary themes is their universality, which is to say that themes are ideas that not only apply to the specific characters and events of a book or play but also express broader truths about human experience that readers can apply to their own lives. There are various themes which could be deduced from the play, such as the following:

Oppression: This is the central theme in the play. This theme runs from the beginning of the play to the end. In the play, the landlord belongs to the capitalist class, while the other characters, like Garuba, Chinwe, Onyema, Akpan Mama, etc., represent the lower class.

The play opens when Betty hands a letter to the tenants living in the landlord's house. This is because the landlord requests that the tenants pay the new rent increment. And, thus, the attendant consequence of noncompliance with the directive is a quit notice. Ola Rotimi uses the landlord as an agent of oppression in the society of the play. To this end, the playwright paints the picture of inequality where the landlord represents the bourgeoisie while other characters maintain the status of the proletariats. As a mark of oppression, the landlord uses the Police force and thugs to oppress the poor. He calls the police to arrest Garuba, who assaulted him and made a jest of his present during Mama's wedding anniversary party. This element of oppression is noticed in the police dialogue.

Policeman I: Where is Garuba?

Onyema Sir?

Policeman II: Garuba – Garuba Onyema? Who is Garuba?

Onyema Oh, e no day. (p. 67)

At this point, the police and the thugs forcefully arrest Garuba and detain him in the police station without minding the psychological torment that Garuba faces as a 'Chosified man' (p. 71). As if that were not enough, the Patriotic People's Party (PPP) withdraws all the domestic flights from operation to convey the party faithful to witness the victorious celebration of the party. To this end, Mama could not go for her medical treatment at the Lagos teaching hospital.

The Theme of Solidarity: Before we delve into discussing the theme of solidarity, it is imperative to first define what solidarity is all about. To this end, therefore, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines solidarity as "unity, agreement and support resulting from shared interests, feelings, actions, etc." This theme is noticed when Papa said, "In this case since I too didn't get the letter, can I discuss it?" (p.12). Even when the police came to arrest Garuba, Betty stubbornly refused the arrest. She shows Garuba a sense of unity. Again, Papa, who did not receive the letter, joins the rest of the tenants to discuss the issue. The tenants in the yard came together to discuss the vexing issue of rent increment. Even though Papa did not receive the letter, he sincerely joined

hands to protest against the increment. In this direction, Betty also supported the protest meeting against the “selfish” wish of the landlord.

The Theme of Injustice: Very importantly, the theme of injustice remains a prominent theme in the play. The brutal treatment given to Garuba, a “chosified” man, shows the highest level of injustice. It is as a result of arresting Garuba that Betty, who is taking care of Onyema, left him behind to protest the arrest. This singular act contributes to the death of Onyema. Again, it is absolutely unjust for the Patriotic People’s Party to stop the operation of the domestic flight as a result of conveying the party’s well-wishers to celebrate the election victory. Consequently, Mama could not go for her much-needed medical treatment; hence, the services of the domestic airline were suspended. Hear this:

Banji: And listen to this: Mama didn’t travel after all.

Hamidu: Why?

Banji: Why? To convey members and well-wishers of the PPP to Lagos to celebrate their victory! (p. 71).

Similarly, the attempt to threaten some tenants with a quit notice letter is a clear indication of injustice in the play.

Struggle: This is another formidable theme in the play. In the capitalist society of the play, the alternative for survival is struggle. In such a condition where the poor live at the mercy of the rich, the only means is to struggle. In the play, when Papa introduces Dokubo to Onyema, he says:

See this man here? He was like you. He lived right here; he's now a professor at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital... Never joked with his studies... It is more struggles than man can beat up life. (Rotimi, p. 71). In Hamidu’s words of encouragement, he said, “Nobody should be deemed useless in a struggle against oppression.” (p. 71).

The Theme of Class Stratification: It is noted that human existence is made up of different class structures. This is why it is biologically stated that “all fingers are not equal”. In the society of the play, therefore, people (characters) belong to various classes. Basically, there are two types of class

divisions in the play. These are the bourgeoisie (haves) and the proletariat (have-nots). Categorically speaking, the Landlord, Hamidu, and Dokubo belong to the upper class, while the rest of the characters are classified as lower class. The lower class is the ruled, while the upper class is the capitalists who control the economic and socio-political activities of the lower class.

Style and Techniques of the Play *If...*

Style: It is a unique way of presenting something. It is a way or method of presenting one's thoughts, which is why it is said that style is the man. In dramaturgy, style results from the manner in which the playwright manipulates his means of expression. In the play, Rotimi tries to present his thought by using naturalism. This is a style basically inspired by naturalistic playwrights like Émile Zola and Anton Chekhov. It is a style that is also known as 'extreme realism'. It emphasises in detail a complete, lifelike way of presenting an artwork. In the play, Rotimi uses naturalism as his style of presentation by using a particular compound in Diobu axis of Port Harcourt to present his thought. It was used to show how some tenants suffer under their landlords.

Techniques: It is a way of doing an activity which needs skills or a way of doing or performing in the work of art. In the play, Rotimi made use of juxtaposition of variegated happenings. It means that several things are happening at the same time but in a controllable manner. It further reveals that everything was just happening here and there technically. Every action in the play happened over three days, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, all in the evenings. Everything happened in that same compound in Diobu. He also engaged multi-language or multilingualism in the play. Betty, Adiagha, and Mama Rosa use pidgin English, while Papa, Hamidu, Banji, and Dr Dokubo and Chinwe use Queen's English, while fishermen use Kalabari language, and Adiagha uses Ibibio, among other languages.

Language in the Play:

Language: It is the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country. The language of the play is hypothetical in nature, as it is based on situations or ideas which are imagined rather than real and true. The language is hypothetical because it guesses an idea that is not based on certain knowledge.

Basically, language, communicates ideas or thoughts from one person to another. To communicate effectively, language must be understood by both parties. As a naturalistic play, Rotimi's dialogue in *If...* is symbolic and proverbial. He also used proverbs and figures of speech as means of communication. On his contributions to the African dramatic field, he stressed that he had been using the English language in a way that the average literate person could understand through the use of simple monosyllabic words. The play *If...* has various happenings in one locale, all at the same time, and this is referred to as the juxtaposition of variegated happenings. In these happenings, their conversations were with simple language, mostly "pidgin" English, which is the "layman's English" and this makes understanding easy for all his readers. This is evident in the dialogue of Hamidu "That is if the masses, the oppressed masses ask for a change, if they will use their votes as tools for their own freedom; if that fails, then mass struggle becomes imperative" (p.16).

Akpan - Exactly, Sir,

I mean – brother, where in this crazy Port Harcourt can a man find a toilet... Forget about single rooms; I mean, a filthy latrine to rent and sleep in within 24 hrs! (p. 13).

Chinwe – Let's give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. page 5

Betty - One day, one-day unago quench!

In the play, you will agree with me that the playwright also made use of metaphoric language. This is noted when Hamidu was talking about Garuba thus:

Hamidu: A choosified being as Aimé Césaire would describe him...

Akpan: He said Garuba had been turned in by a thing. In order words... Garuba has been thingified (pp. 16-17).

In addition to the above, Rotimi deploys some Nigerian local languages such as Ibibio, Kalabari and Igbo, as seen in the dialogue of Adiaga, Akpan and Ukot, Fisherman and Mama Rosa. While Betty uses pidgin English and Edo exclamations, Papa, Hamidu, Benji and Akpan use queen's

English. Also, Garuba uses sign language because he couldn't talk, so he communicates with signs (non-verbal communication).

Conclusion:

In the course of this research, the work agreed that a dramatist is an agent of social change whose works interrogate teething socio-economic and political realities evident in society.

Connecting to dramaturgy, the work was explicit in asserting that a play must, as a matter of fact, anchor its structural base on plot structure, themes, language, techniques and styles as mechanisms of operation. The play is structured into various happenings. This is as a result of physical demarcation of the dramatic actions. However, the dramatic action in the play is internally structured from the point of exposition through climax to the resolution point. While the various themes that emphasised the playwright's social vision were explicit. The language, technique and style of the play explained the author's simplicity in crafting a play that meets the masses' attention and social experience. In all, the dramatic action showcases the class struggle between the ruling class and the oppressed masses.

Recommendations

Having thoroughly analysed the use of and presentation of plot structure, themes, language, technique, and style in Ola Rotimi's *If... A tragedy of the ruled*, the researcher puts forward the following recommendations:

- ❖ The dramatist should present their plays in a logical plot structure to make their philosophical viewpoint and dramatic actions clearer to the audience.
- ❖ It is advisable that themes in a play should connect directly to the social vision of the playwright. To this end, the theme should be exact and explicit as a carrier of the playwright's intention and idea.
- ❖ The paper further encourages dramatists and other theatrical artistes to, as a matter of fact, emphasise the presentation and production of Ola Rotimi's *If ... A tragedy of the ruled*, on stage before the audience to enable the graphical and visual explication of the power struggle between the ruler and the ruled experienced and appreciated.

- ❖ It is also important to recommend that lawmakers, policymakers and cultural administrators should put emphasis on recognizing the importance and value of drama as a channel of public awareness and social critique.
- ❖ It is also the opinion of the researcher that the plays should be deliberately embedded into the educational curricula at both the secondary and tertiary levels. This will serve as a medium of civic education and social enlightenment to the students.
- ❖ Finally, it is yet another recommendation of this work that playwrights should use a medium of language, technique and style that will not be more difficult in their dramaturgy. This will go a long way for easier readership and clear understanding of the impulse of the dramatic action presented in the play.

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