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# ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING TODAY (ELTT) A Journal for Teachers of English & Communication Skills

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#### Aims:

ELTT is a bi-annual journal devoted to the publication of articles, research reports and reviews on English Language Teaching for those involved in the teaching of English as a Second Language. It aims to:

- Provide a forum of exchange of ideas and experiences for teachers of English.
- Encourage teachers and researchers, publishers and writers to work together to develop teaching procedure, ideas and materials for the advancement of ELTT.
- Promote and support research in the areas of English for Academic/Special purposes.

Although ELTT welcomes contibutions in all areas of English Language research, greater emphasis will be given to papers with strong pratical classroom experience and application. Such areas may cover Needs Analysis, Course Design, Methodology, Testing, Materials Development, Programme Management, Teacher Training and Evaluation.

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# Literature as a Mirror of Society: An Exposition of the Themes of J. P Clark

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#### Abstract

Literature is a veritable tool for cultural dissemination. In the plays of J.P. Clark, realities of the people's culture have been presented to depict actual situation of man as he tries to adjust to circumstances surrounding him. The effect is that the acceptable and unacceptable aspects of these ways of life are mirrored, giving insight into the realities of Nigerian culture. This lifestyle presents challenges to the civilized and uncivilized minds making way for clashes and disagreements as man struggles lo survive in the course of life. There are lessons to learn in life, that man cannot live above his circumstances but merely drifts along helplessly in the course of forces militating against him. It is suggested that budding writers be rooted in their cultural norms because such literature could help educate others about their culture. It can also create awareness of societal norms far and wide. It can reawaken consciousness and even help to revive the forgotten aspects of the cultural foundations of societies.

## Introduction

A look at what may be regarded as 'Literature' and consequently 'drama' and 'culture" may draw us closer to what might be expected to see of J.P. Clark and his themes deeply rooted in his cultural background. Literature, as an art, has been venerably described in ancient times, as a form of imitation, a description which presents literature as a way of reproducing or recreating the experiences of life in words. Generally, literature is a display of manifold experiences of living people. Specifically, 'drama' as derived from Greek simply means 'to act'. According to Graft (1976:3), "Drama is a condensation of everyday life, whose many aspects - visible and invisible, tangible and intangible - it attempts to manifest, embody or affirm". As a form of literature, drama is unique in the sense that it is not only capable of drawing on all life for its raw material but it also utilizes the pulsating raw material of actual human bodies, attributes and behaviour as a 'sine qua non' of its very medium of expression. In this way, drama expresses life more closely than any other artistic form of expression. Of culture, Trilling (1951:206) says it is "made up of half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value..... hinted at by small actions, sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm, sometimes by the words that are used ...... the things that for good or bad draw the people of a culture together and separate them from the people of another culture."

From the above presentation, we can see that culture and literature are interwoven because in trying to reproduce the experiences of living people, literature also reproduces the circumstances surrounding these experiences. The circumstances portray the unique lifestyle of the environment which is embedded in that peculiar culture. This paper therefore demonstrates that the literature of a country or society is affected and influenced by how the people of that country or society live. In view of this, it becomes a task trying to separate the culture of a people from the literature that emanates from it. Bearing this in mind, this paper will examine the themes in the dramatic works of J.P. Clark to discover how he has used literature to portray his societal lifestyle.

# Clark's Literary Background

Clark writes plays which depict a confrontation between an individual and forces much greater than himself in a traditional setting. As a true Ijaw son, Clark grew up very aware of his environment and the events therein. This awareness, no doubt, gave him insight into The way of life of his people. Writing on "Aspects of Nigerian drama"

... as the roots of the European drama go back to the Egyptian Osiris and the Greek Dionysius. so are the origins of Nigerian drama likely to be found in the early religious and magical ceremonies and festivals of the peoples of this country.

Clark is no doubt fascinated by ancestral or myth plays which to him are classics of traditional drama. This fascination has driven him into transforming some local myths, folktales, and native dance - dramas into modern stage productions and has to his credit 'home-spun' tragic plays, one of which is written after the revenge tradition.

In his early life, Clark's dramatic art talent was nurtured by his admiration of scholars like English poets, Keats, Shelly and Tennyson. Clark included Sir Walter Scot and Charles Dickens among the fiction writers that influenced him. He declares, according to Awoyinfa (1985:8), "I developed my literary interest by reading and learning to write after models that immediately impressed me". Secondly, as a pioneer editor of *The Horn* magazine at the University of Ibadan, Clark says: "It gave all of us a chance to work with words in the ways we wanted... Some of us took ourselves quite seriously" Awoyinfa (1985:8). As a research fellow in those early days of life at the Institute of African Studies m the University of Ibadan, he worked on Ijaw traditional myths and legends and since then, he has not relaxed his interest on his culture and tradition. It will be noted that Clark had to quit his professorial post at the University for an adventure in the cultural horizon in search of the Nigerian cultural missing link and in search of recognizable loopholes in his own works and also in search of details, clarity and a fulfillment of new hopes and cultural vision. This explains the traditional touch with which he embellishes his works. As a poet, playwright, critic, journalist, university professor, translator and editor, Clark's dramatic works impress us with their obsessive concern for the tragic plight of man as they bewilder us with their artistic fusion of the traditional and the modern. His cultural background did not in all these leave him wondering where to source his materials but presented a rich source of resources that gave the works a uniqueness of distinction.

# Themes in J.P. Clark's Plays

Though Clark's plays may seem pastiches of Greek tragedy which they are not, Clark's alleged imitativeness does not detract from the excellence of his plays. Despite the fact that he was influenced in school as a scholar, dark did not swallow hook, line and sinker all those foreign influences- His themes are carefully selected to reflect events which persist from communal societies to contemporary times. His plays are a dramatization of local incidents, carefully chosen from traditional folktales, or myths. Instead of a mere imitator dark chose his themes to enable him take a critical look at man and his attempt to adjust in the society and the interaction between the two. The problems arising from discordant interaction between them form Clark's views of the tragedy of man.

#### **Cultural Inclinations**

The literary merit of dark's plays, with or without influences, derives not from his ability to produce a 'copy' but mainly from the writer's skill and resourcefulness in projecting an African consciousness of a diverse cultural heritage. Clark in his plays deals with human problems as they attempt to adjust in the society. In Song of a Goat, Clark presents the helplessness of Zifa in the face of adversity which he regards as a penalty visited upon him by some forests "for one who died of the white taint". Consequently, Zifa had brought his father back home too early from the with it or leave his wife to his younger brother as the custom demands to "take over the tilling of the fertile soil". So The themes of tension, anger, temptation, revenge and the decay of a 'house' unfold in supple, sometimes tender lines moments ending in murder. The incestuous relationship between Tonye and Ebiere is a glaring violation of the moral in order to appease the gods could hardly be done before the consequences of the adultery doomed on them. He

"Blood of goat
So large a cowrie may pass
thro its nose
A big gourd of palm wine and

three heads of Kolanut split before the dead of The land, and the deed is done. Three Plays in Ashaolu (1978).

The Masquerade runs a sequel to Song of a Goat and seems to be the actual end of the latter with a double catharses leading to the tragic deaths of Tonye and Zifa, and then the murder of Tufa who is also the illegitimate son of Ebiere in Song of a Goat. The Masquerade dramatizes a well-known African folktale about a young girl who rejects all suitors and finally falls to the borrowed charms of the stranger who turns out to be a demon. The chosen young suitor is incidentally disapproved by the girl's father and there the clash begins. Clark here portrays the sinister shadow beneath the surface glitter, and its danger to those bewitched by it.

# **Domestic Violence**

Clark's tragic view of life developed through his first two plays which portray man's helplessness in adversities, hostile and uncompromising society, alienation of man from his natural environment, inexplicable malevolent forces militating against man and other unpleasant experiences in man's life journey. In this apparent parent-daughter conflict, and tradition-freewill conflict, we tend to sympathize with Tufa in his dying speech because he comes to his destruction through no discernible fault of his. The Masquerade is a pure juxtaposition of the traditional conception of societal norms with the questioning spirit of the revolting youth. It is the highly charged argument generated by this juxtaposition that paves way for the inevitable catharsis,

Tufa is the fruit of an incestuous affair and in Umunko's words the "young husband without a broom/To his stock". Tradition makes it very difficult for such men to be easily married in that society. It is, even, regarded as a misfortune for a girl, a virgin at that to be married to such a man. "Only a girl born of slaves/or found without her flower" would foolhardily go into marriage to a man of Tufa's caste. Arguing against this proposed union by Tufa and Titi, Diribi questioned in Clark (1964):

Did he tell you also his father Usurped the bed of his elder brother, yes, Brazenly in his lifetime, and for shame Of it after hanged himself in broad day light While this unfortunate abused husband Walked of his own will into the sea?

Titi's reply, also a question, seems to be what lies beneath the tragedy in the play:

Well, is the seed to be crushed and cast Away because of aberration And blunder by those who laid out The field

Despite the disapproval of this proposal, Titi resolves her conflict in favour of marriage to Tufa which ended up in her being shot dead by her father. This tragic sense of life presented in The Masquerade and that of the Song of a Goat points to the assertion that human destiny is affected by uncontrollable forces, usually those of unhappiness which can apply not just to an individual in a stifling society but to humanity in general.

# Poverty and Helplessness

Clark's third play, The Raft, also is endowed with the tragic view of life. Through the fate of the raft and its crew, Clark dramatizes the helplessness of man drifting on a ship of destiny under unknown and inexplicable forces. Man's ignorance of these forces and his incapability to effectively solve these problems beset him on his way through life journey and so his world remains miserable. He merely drifts along helplessly, unable to overcome forces militating against him. The existentialist interpretation sees The Raft as symbolizing the world, uncomfortable and uncertain, full of mosquitoes and bugs, in which man is doomed from the start and is left to drift in inevitable perdition. Clark's intention in this play is clearly a dramatization of the ill fate that bedevils man in his efforts to solve his problems. The Raft passes a serious comment on society and its impact on man both individually and collectively. The microcosmic world of the lumbermen on the raft is set against the society from which they have been alienated by the nature of their occupation.

Clark here raises another issue which inveighs man's inhumanity to man as practiced with impunity by the powersthat-be and against the widening gulf between the rich and the poor, against the disruptive yet continued co-existence of abject poverty and yet limitless affluence, against an aggravation of social injustice and inequality, all of which accelerate the destruction of a society in which corruption in all its ramifications, political victimization, oppression of innocent citizens, and insecurity of life and property are the rule rather than the exception. When eventually the raft broke into two, it could be said to symbolize a disintegrated society.

From the foregoing discussions, it is clear that though the raft represents the oppressed in the society, as symbolized by the lumbermen, the long-term consequences of their miserable plight are likely to extend to every other person in the society and on a larger scale, to the entire world - poor or rich. This is why the misery of the four men on the raft is of some universal significance. Their world is a part of the larger world outside the raft. Therefore, through their frustrations and agony we sense the inevitable situation of men and women existing where struggle is futile.

At this point, worthy of mention are some other Nigerian writers who also heavily drew inspiration and theme to reflect the culture of their own people and who also followed keenly the erosion of their own cultures by foreign lifestyles and values. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka are the outstanding ones. Achebe's Things Fall Apart is a true depiction of the culture of the Igbo People of Nigeria on which the writing was based. A stranger to that land can conveniently study the culture of that society in the novel. No Longer at Ease portrays a gradual erosion of Igbo culture that started from Things Fall Apart. It went on and on until the contemporary political era which polluted that culture and which also provided a new background for literary works. Thus, Okigbo portrayed political banditry, oppression and deceit which gave rise to social and economic instability as Soyinka satirized the troubled cultures which have been robbed of human warmth and replaced by suspicion, fear and hate.

In these works of Clark so far mentioned, it was evident that the root of his literary works was not just Ijaw alone but Nigeria and indeed the black race of Africa: As Nigerian and consequently African culture was challenged by new ways of life that accompanied Western education, writers like J.P. Clark began to face fresh challenges that also became part of the life of the people. Issues like poverty, oppression, and obstruction of human justice, opposition, politics, disillusionment and despair among others found a place in literature. People became alienated from their culture with the advent of independence from when culture was neglected. With the near disintegration of cultural ties that bound the people together, social crisis, suspicion, fear and hate, alienation and vices began to multiply in the society. This has given rise to another background to contemporary literary works to portray societal trends. More of contemporary heritage of their people, more of contemporary social, political, religious, economic themes are focused as part of the contemporary lifestyle.

# **Implications for Teaching**

Culture cannot be divorced from the literature of any people. Therefore, it becomes pertinent that any teaching in literature that neglects the societal norms and cultural background and influences on the circumstances so presented has indeed failed to present the true literature.

Societal and cultural norms should be integrated into the teaching of literature to better present either an event or a situation that emanates from it. Failure to do so will only give an imbalanced account of events which makes such literature difficult to understand when read by people outside that culture. Literary writers also are harbingers of societal norms who should be thoroughly exposed to the cultural lifestyle of their environments.

### Recommendations

In view of the issues raised in the discussions in this paper, recommendations on how to improve the reflection of societal and cultural norms in the literature of any people especially for the up-coming generations are made here.

Since literature is a medium of cultural dissemination, it is recommended that writers expose themselves adequately to their cultural situations to be able to present the society better.

If literature should be problem solving, it must present the true picture of any societal situation to give an insight into any issue with a view to finding solution to any problematic area. Unless writers are adequately informed about such

Experience has shown that some natives in diaspora have lost touch of their original roots and culture. Therefore, such people in diaspora can still learn and appreciate their societal heritage through literature. Interested ones among them can even begin to participate, even in diaspora. If properly presented, literature can sell a society to another society. In this respect, societal representation must be objectively made in any work of literature.

#### Conclusion

This paper has explored society as an integral basis of literature as seen in the drama works of J.P. Clark. The integration of cultural life into drama made his works adaptable to the Nigerian situation and popular in Africa. It is therefore hoped that writers of contemporary literature would borrow a leaf in propagating their societal and cultural heritage to keep it alive. Since people cannot exist outside of their culture, it becomes pertinent that such societal and cultural heritage be adequately presented to portray the nature and quality of life of such a people.

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