

Book Review

Nadia Anwar, *Dynamic Distancing in Nigerian Drama: A Functional Approach to Metatheatre*. Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2016. ISBN (paperback) 13: 978-3-8382-0842-8. pp. 256. £26.45

Kiran Singh

University of Derby, UK

This book analyses a varied range of plays and playwrights. The first and second chapters explore the act of distancing in metatheatre and furthermore and its function in Nigerian Drama, whilst the remaining chapters focus on metatheatricality and its functions in post-independence Nigerian plays by Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Esiaba Irobi and Stella 'Dia Oyedepo. The three appendices usefully clarify different performance traditions in Nigerian drama; offer a short explanation of the term 'meta' in relation to metatheatre, meta-narrative and grand narrative; and finally an interview with Dr Stella 'Dia Oyedepo.

Nadia Anwar states she wants to 'bring to the fore lesser known yet major voices of world literature' (p. xi) because in some parts of the world non-western literary plays get less attention due to the colonial imposition and continuing prevalence of Eurocentric educational systems in post-colonial countries such as India and Pakistan. The theoretical framework discussed in the preliminary section concentrates on the theories and ideas by Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) and Thomas J. Scheff (b. 1929) as their exploration of theatrical techniques focus the work on an understanding of how metatheatrical elements help to achieve a 'balanced state of audience reception by affecting the viewers on both cognitive and emotional levels.' (p. xii)

The first chapter defines and examines distancing in metatheatre by focussing on distancing as a 'dramatic imperative,' (p. 2) that signifies separation. After reviewing previous studies on distancing by writers such as Kota and Hayman, and the work of Brecht, Scheff and Bullough,

the author explores how, in psychical terms, the relation between the self and the object is not broken entirely when they are distanced from each other. She argues that since distancing fluctuates and occurs at different levels, the objectivity required for distancing to take place is perceptual/individualistic and contextual/situated. Thus, for Anwar, the strategies of dramatic distancing help to 'attain meaning in the audience's perception'. Furthermore, she also examines the impact that intertextuality and inter-historicity have in creating and shifting distance in drama. This way, she creates an interesting connection about the tendency to look for larger meanings about life in metatheatre and the Shakespearean idea of the 'world as stage.' (p. 29)

The second chapter argues that playwrights have written using both Western and Nigerian techniques but the commonality that ties their plays, regardless of whether they use indigenous or western forms, is that they feature metatheatrical techniques. Metatheatricality allows dramatists to create a 'balanced dramatic distance' (p. 45) that can be located between under-distanced (emotionally overpowering) and over-distanced (intellectually overwhelming) dramatic situations. Anwar uses this chapter to trace back distancing in dramatic terms to pre-colonial performances in Nigeria. After presenting an overview and analysis of the Egungun and Mmonwu Masquerades, the author explores how modern Nigerian drama 'owes its form and content to many of the traditional features employed in performances of Egungun masquerades.' (p. 65)

Chapter Three, which focussing on Wole Soyinka's, *Death and the King's Horsemen* (1974) and *King Baabu* (2001), cross-references other plays by Soyinka to illuminate the 'salient features of Soyinka's dramaturgy (p. 43). Anwar argues that Soyinka's use of intertextuality in plays, such as *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), creates cultural distance and therefore an intercultural dialogue. Further, she shows how, in the selected dramas, metatheatrical distancing is achieved in different ways that operate to remind the audience of the theatrical nature of character.

The fourth chapter focusses on Ola Rotimi's, *Kurunmi* (1971) and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1993) that underline him as a 'threshold playwright.' (p. 103). In this chapter, there is a good discussion of 'reality' and 'dramatic illusion'. Using Rotimi's plays, Anwar not only makes an in-depth analysis of reality/fiction but in regards to distancing she discusses notions of his use of 'reality' and 'dramatic illusion'. She develops her argument to assert that inter-historicity helps to make Rotimi's plays metatheatrical because they use historical information in a 'frame of contemporary reality', which breaks the boundaries of the 'established narrative.' (p. 112) Chapter Five is an extensive analysis of Babafemi Adebeyi Osofisan's, *The Chattering and the Song* (1977) and *Women of Owu* (2006)

are analysed by Anwar. She begins by discussing Osofisan's exploitation of Brechtian styles to create plays with a political charge. The author's analysis and discussion of Osofisan's dramas demonstrate that despite portraying different and rapidly changing political and social realities in Nigeria, Osofisan balances emotional and intellectual distancing.

The final chapter analyses *Hangmen Also Die* (1989) by Esiaba Irobi and Stella 'Dia Oyedepo's *A Play That Was Never to Be* (1998). Irobi's play, which uses analepsis and foreshadowing as a way of achieving the effect of the disruption of theatrical time, as well as violence as a distancing tool, is discussed as a metatheatrical play. In this chapter, the focus is on the way in which playwrights develop new techniques to combat the sensitising effect the exposure of violence has on an audience; she observes that plays from previous generations of Nigerian dramatists affect the reception of contemporary audiences in different ways because each generation is becoming more and more sensitised to violence.

Overall, the book is excellent in presenting the function and impact of distancing in a diverse range of Nigerian plays; not only does it specifically analyse a number of plays but it also refers to and draws examples from other relevant plays too. It makes various fresh observations on the use of metatheatre in Nigerian drama and identifies new perspectives that have previously been unnoticed. This is a must read for anyone interested in Nigerian drama, as well as, the concept of metatheatre in African drama.