

# Literary Adaptation in Nigerian Modern Drama: Concept, Theory and Significance

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## Abstract

*Literary adaptation as a concept is giving a new interpretation to an already existing text in a new medium and culture. It engenders transformation and creativity with or without a departure from the original version. Literary and cultural interplay between two texts of different cultural backgrounds often results in duality and conflict when a text is adapted to another culture or genre with or without a departure from the original text. As such, researchers, university scholars, students as well as teachers of literary and cultural studies often seek clarifications between the interplay and the duality in two cultural settings. In contemporary times, playwrights culturally adapt novels to dramas with or without a departure from the original text. This discovery of novels as a source of materials for drama in the 1960s triggered the interest in adaptation of Western texts to African and Nigerian contexts. Although there are previous studies in literary adaptations of Western texts and Nigerian modern drama in the literature, it was observed that the significance of adaptations of Western texts to Nigerian modern drama and the cultural similarities between the adapted text and the source text caused scholars to yearn for more investigation. Consequently, this paper discusses the concept of adaptation as a literary genre in Nigerian modern drama, intertextuality and the drama mode of presentation. It highlights the aesthetics and significance of adaptation as a genre of Nigerian modern drama. The paper employs qualitative research method using Kristeva's Intertextuality and Iser's Reader-Response theories as frameworks. Findings reveal that literary adaptation of Western texts plays a significant role in the development of Nigerian modern drama. The study recommends further studies in adaptations of French and English literatures, its socio-cultural influence and interplay with Nigeria sociocultural milieu.*

**Keywords:** adaptation, comparative literature, cultural interplay, modern drama, western text

## 1. Introduction

Literature in all of its forms such as prose, drama and poetry reflect the history, culture, civilization and socio-political realities of a given society. It draws from myths, rituals, culture, politics and traditions. Literature often travels across boundaries and could be interpreted into a new culture and genre. This interpretation is known as literary adaptation where cultures interplay with and influence each other regardless of space and time. Literary adaptation among intellectuals of diverse cultural and linguistic divides cuts across the globe and engenders influence in literary and cultural productions. It reflects in the works of Francophone as well as Anglophone writers, where already existing texts, experiences, cultural and sociopolitical realities are adapted to novels and plays in different milieux and contexts. This has made the subjects of Intertextuality and reader-response to be recurrent in modern literary discourse around the world.

## 2. Literary Adaptation across Nigeria and Francophone Space

In Francophone Cameroun, Jacqueline Leloup in 1986 adapted Sophocles' *Oedipus Myth* (1984) to Cameroonian myth with the title *Guéido*. The Senegalese Abdou Anta Kâ's three adaptations: *La fille des Dieux* (1957) from Sidiki Dembele's *Le chant de Madhi*; *Les Amazoulou* (1968) from Thomas Mafolo's *Chaka* and *Gouverneur de la Rosée* (1972) from Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneur de la Rosée* are all cross-cultural adaptations into African literary spaces. The works of other Francophone writers such as Mongo Beti's *Ville cruelle*, Sembene Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Camara Laye's *Le*

*Maitre de la parole* and Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* are adaptations of the sociopolitical and economic realities of their respective societies in contact with the French people. Among the works of Anglophone Africa writers are Efua Sutherland's *Edufa* (1967), a Ghanaian adaptation of Euripides' *Alcestis* (438BC) while Welcome Msomi's *Umabatha* (1970) is a Zulu cultural version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Interestingly, works of Nigerian French literary critics such as Olaoye Abioye's *Le Preux chasseur dans la forêt infestée de Démons* (1989) and Soyinka's *The Forest of a Thousand Demons* (1968) are both French and English adaptations of G.O. Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irumhole* (1938).

Literary adaptation of Western texts to Nigerian contexts, drama in particular, gave rise to modern dramatists and playwrights such as Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Zulu Sofola, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima and Bode Sowande. These authors engaged with the aesthetics of adaptations of Western texts to promote Nigerian literature in general and drama in particular.

### **3. Adaptation, Intertextuality and Reader-Response**

The concept of adaptation consists of a representation of an existing work, culture, movement or ideology in a new milieu. It is a response from the reading of an existing text that shows the relationship between the previous and the new texts. Adaptation is simply a creative re-appropriation of an existing work of art to a particular new milieu and which is a form of a response to the reading of a source text. Intertextuality is a literary theory that establishes the presence of a source text in a target text. It is a literary tool for identifying the differences and the concordances between an original text and the adapted version. The term was first associated with French semiotician and critics, Julia Kristeva, in her essay *The Bounded Text* (1986) when she made reference to Bakhtin in her work *The Word, Dialogue and Novel*. She was influenced by Saussurean and Bakhtinian models. Texts according to this theory are constructed of already existing discourse and do not present clear and stable meanings but are connected to on-going cultural processes. She describes a word (text) as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings (Kristeva, 1986:36). She postulates that authors do not create their texts from their own mind, but rather compile them from pre-existing texts. Thus, the text becomes a permutation of other texts.

The theory draws strength from the post-modernist theorists' view of the self-insufficiency of a text and its dependency on another text. To these theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes and Michael Riffaterre, the presence of a text in another text in its various forms only explains the dynamics of text and its continuity in an on-going socio-cultural process. Intertextuality, therefore, attempts to unravel this cross-media presence and interaction of texts across the global space. The theory also emphasizes the birth of a new text in place of its author, which helps the researcher to dwell more on the textual analysis. Intertextuality in the present research is the study of relationship between the novel and the drama genres in term of similarities and divergences when a text is adapted to another medium.

This theory has been applied to different categories of texts by scholars regardless of the author's status or the popularity of the text in question. Adeoti (2010) applied it to the works of Soyinka, Osofisan and Yerima while Afolayan (2012) compared Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* to Hope Eghagh's *Death Not a Redeemer*. The application of this theory helps to identify areas of influence, differences, similarities and elements of cultural interplay among the selected texts. The study adopts this theory because there are different texts and genres to be compared using textual analytical tools and knowledge offered by intertextuality theory. Also, the reading of original texts revealed some thematic and contextual affinities of the adapted texts. It provided a background needed for a meaningful exploration and analysis of the selected texts from the point of view of cultural interplay, structure, settings, style, thematic thrust, characterization and plot arrangement. Intertextuality theory also emphasizes the relationship between texts which is the hallmark of this present comparative study.

## 4. Wolfgang Iser's Reader Response Theory

Reader response theory was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States of America and Germany. Prominent among the forerunners of this theory are Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, David Bleich, Hans-Robert Jauss and Roland Barthes. It is a literary theory that emphasizes the role of a reader and the outcome of the reading experience with a particular text. This theory underlines the fact that there is no authoritative meaning to a particular work of art but how an individual reader interprets it in a unique way based on experience (cultural, intellectual and emotional) while he transacts with the text. It equally stresses on the sharp contrast between the author's meaning and the reader's perception. The reader is no longer a receiver of whatever meaning the author proposes in his work but a central agent in the meaning processes.

Long before the emergence of this theory, the author and the text have occupied the central stage of literary criticism and textual analysis among critics. Textual analysis thereafter shifted its focus from the author and the text to what the individual reader perceives and transacts with the reading of the text. Their opinions, reactions and interpretations become more important in the re-reading of a text. By this theory, a reader becomes a *force majeure* in what becomes of a text before its public. Fayolle (1978:6) attests to the relevance of this theory as he argues that, a text does not exist beyond two dimensions: the force that pushed the author to write and the one that motivated the reader and their response to the text which they reinvented for their own usage.

Theorists such as Iser, Fish, Holland and Bleich have a consensus on the role of a reader in a textual analysis, interpretation and literary communication in general. Iser (1978) and Tyson (1999) agree that there is no final or fixed reading and interpretation to a text. There are a thousand and one meanings that could be derived from a text. Tyson (1999:154) submits that:

“... the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make meaning they find in literature.”

The new text is a creation of reading, understanding and interpretation of the old text. This interpretation relies on the degree of reader's dynamic, linguistic, cultural and intellectual capacity which he bears on the new text. Mohammed (2013:84) argues that, a literary text is incomplete and attains its completeness only when it is read. Textual interpretation according to Iser is based on a tripod which are the reading, the many interpretations and the statements of the text.

**(i). A text must be read:** Iser (1978:24) opines that “... the text can only come to life when it is read and if it is to be examined; it must therefore be seen through the eyes of the reader.” The reading of a text precedes any response by a reader. It is a process of literary exploration leading to other text projections as a result of text dynamics. Reader-Response theory therefore affords us an approach to understanding the cultural transactions between two texts and the French texts that are their projections.

**(ii). Many possible interpretative projections of a text:** linguistic and cultural codes in the existing text are decoded resulting in a new hermeneutic whole. The Greek *Oedipus Rex* that was read and adapted to the Nigerian and the Cameroonian stages by Ola Rotimi and Jacqueline Leloup with the titles *The Gods Are Not to Blame* and *Guéido* respectively is an example of the Reader-Response principle that underlines the indeterminate interpretations of a text. Iser (1978:30) summarizes this indeterminate nature of a text as follows:

“Indeterminacy can also be counterbalanced at any given time in terms of the individual experience of the reader. He can reduce a text to the level of his own standards on to the text in order to grasp its specific meaning [...] The act of reading is, therefore, a process of seeking to pin down the oscillating structure of the text to some specific meaning.”

Iser (1978:1) argues again that a literary text can only produce a response when it is read. The reading process therefore becomes a transaction between the text and the reader. This transaction is not complete until responses are produced.

**(iii). Response is based on the statements of the read text:** the statements of the text enable the reader to create or project other meanings in the new text. This text is brought to life by various interpretations of the readers to fill cultural, linguistic, historical and psychological gaps applicable to the readers' cultural milieu. These gaps are inexhaustible and indeterminate. Okwuchukwu (2014:39) refers to these literary gaps as "... those interpretations that are brought to bear on certain parts of the text which are not explicitly stated or which have varying meanings, but which the reader inputs in order to make meaning of the part of the literary text."

Iser (1978:13) reemphasizes that no literary text exists outside the reader in the reaffirmation that "... neither the text nor the reader should be studied in isolation rather the text produces certain 'blanks' or 'gaps' that the reader must attempt to complete."

This process of literary interpretation from novel to drama as espoused by Iser (1978) provides a platform for a dramatist creatively to fill observable cultural and linguistic gaps in such a way that the themes, plots and characters retain their literary purposes. Iser (1978:24) emphasizes the need to name and analyze the cause of a response to a literary text. The application of this theory focuses on plot structure, setting, themes, language, style and characterization.

## 5. Literary Adaptation, Translation and Nigerian Modern Drama

Literature is a direct adaptation of human experiences in a given society at a given time and period. These include stories of success, defeats, myth, culture and legends relating person to person and civilization to civilization. African literature is not an exception to this practice. Jeyifo (1985:42) posits that "... literature is the mirror of any given society." The literature of a society reveals its virtues and vices. Its objectives are to correct the vices, uphold the virtues and propagate good morals and cultures for the overall development of that society. This is where the creative function of a writer comes into play. This is found in literary texts and drama in particular. Traditional rites, festivals and ceremonies form the major source of drama in African of which Nigeria is a major geographical component. This African theatre results from performances of ritual activities from antiquity. These include festivals, religious rituals, weddings and funerals. However, African theatre and Nigerian drama in particular had over decades been influenced by Western literary tradition.

Drama and theatre are sometimes interchangeably used in modern literature. However, drama is distinct because it is a written text waiting to be transformed to theatre before an audience while theatre is the performance of a dramatic work (Oni, 2017:290). Since writers do not write in vacuum, Soyinka apart from promoting African myths, legends and the Yoruba socio-cultural patrimony, advocates the enlightenment of the common people in terms of the cases of corruption, nepotism and dishonesty perpetrated by the ruling class as against the well-being of the masses through the dramatic creation of adaptation and cultural translation.

## 6. Literary Adaptation and Intertextuality

The practice of adaptation and interpretation from one form of art to another across the globe emphasizes the notion of text projections and dynamics in which a text is considered an open system as other texts emerge from it as responses to the extra-text environment. Martinez (1996:269) opines that "... we can find theories of Intertextuality wherever there has been discourse about texts, from the classics, such as Plato, Aristotle, Horace and Longinus, to Bakhtin, Kristeva and other twentieth-century theorists such as Genette, Barthes, Derrida and Riffaterre ..." Mohammad (2013:4) posits that writers are creative, putting together strings of words and ideas to a specific end, and intertextuality is merely a tool of which writers avail themselves to approach a tale.

Balogun (2013:157) explains the relevance of this theory to textual analysis when he identifies its four principles: Reading a literary text allows an incursion in history; it brings out a resurgent phenomenon that makes culture a place of sudden appearance of forgotten traditions and demonstrates the structural disposition of a novel to integrate units of variants in a polyphonic manner; it implies a method with which a reader of a novel perceives a link between the one they are reading and the ones that preceded or succeeded it; it is a concept that an author of a novel draws their experience from “already read” in other works. These tenets capture the need for Intertextuality in a bid to understand the relationship between texts, just as Barthes (1977:205) opines that cultural codes deployed by any single story will emigrate to other texts and can also be complemented by ancillary art forms; there is no lack of hosts.

A text in this context is in different media and means different things to various categories of people and locations. This suggests that analysis of the relationship among texts as expressed in one cultural code and the interpreted version requires the knowledge of Intertextual theory for better understanding. Okwuchukwu (2014:42) argues that texts are professionally defined and medium specific. Whereas to a literary artist, a novel, play or poem is a text, to an architect, an architectural piece is a text. Allen (2000:1) posits that “... texts whether they be literary or non-literary are viewed by modern theorists as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. They are what theorists now call Intertextual.” When meanings of texts are being discussed, intertextuality is important to understanding textual relationship when a text transforms from one medium (novel) to another (theatre).

Bakhtin (1984:201) in agreement, maintains that “... the life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another.” To this end, what writers call texts are mere adaptations of oral traditions into readable graphics (prints). This further establishes that texts are reproductions of existing meaningful experiences, transformed into different mediums of communication. It borrows, translates or adapts to another art medium. Since there is no final knowledge, as the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament is of great importance to a clergy, so is Intertextuality to any meaningful literary critic. Rohou (1996:20) sees intertextuality as the presence of an historical culture in a written work. It is a concept in which a narrator cites fragments of other works as they work on “déjà lu.”

Literary adaptation according to Martinez (1996:269) is as old as human culture itself. In principle and in practice, it falls within the scope of global practices. It is the art of deliberate re-rendering of an already existing work of art in a new form or genre. This imitation involves the transposition of the work of another creative artist into a different medium within a specific socio-historical and cultural context (Adeoti, 2010:8). This literary practice has necessitated the study of similarities and differences between the new and the old literary cultures which gave birth to what Kristeva called Intertextuality. Hutcheon (2006:8-9), describes it as a process of reception, through which “... we experience adaptations as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition and variation” or, in other words, the ways in which we associate the entity or product as both similar to and a departure from the original.

Adaptation and translation both contribute to the studies in comparative literature and the global dialogue of culture. Adaptation is not subjected to text fidelity as in translation. While cultural modification or relocation is permitted in adaptation, literary translation celebrates linguistic and thematic fidelity. Owoeye (2008:186) submits that “... the existing and the new meet in an artistic marriage to give birth to a literary child imbued with the attributes of both,” while Johnson (1984:48) describes adaptation as a simple translation of the precursor texts which could be intersemiotic. Baker (2000:7) concurs with Adeoti (2010:13) above on the universal nature of literary adaptation. This adaptation of existing text is what Hutcheon (2006:4) calls “... a repetition with variations.” Timothy-Asobele (2003:xiv) sees it as a global dialogue of culture while Conteh-Morgan and Olaniyan (2004:53) recapture it as “... an intercultural negotiation between the new and the old text.”

Dasylva (1997:70), in *Dramatic Literature: A Critical Source Book*, distinguishes adaptation from translation. He writes that “... translation is a rendering of the original [...] as accurate as possible in the translator’s choice of language without losing its dramatic quality.” It could be intersemiotic,

interlingual and intertextual. A literary adapter transforms an existing text or experience into a new text of its own hermetic value usually from one art medium to another. Nigerian playwrights adapted existing Western classical texts to achieve their literary targets. The contact between Nigerians and the Western texts, which continues to shape the imagination and creativity of Nigerian writers in literature, drama in particular, flourished from this origin.

African literature is generally influenced by Western texts. This is evident in the works of African writers who adapted Western texts to the African-Yoruba milieu for cultural purposes. Interestingly, through these adaptations, the substance of the Yoruba cultural heritage was given a visibility among world literature. According to Oni (2017:269), this cultural heritage can only gain currency when compared with western epistemological thought in line with Soyinka's literary engagements. He again opines that what animates the modern Nigerian dramatic presentations are western texts (2017:285). Timothy-Asobele (2016a:48) argues that, instead of looking for original and authentic texts which do not exist, people should be content with the duality of ideas, thoughts and beliefs, for every person creates their own vision. This intercultural dialogue has been the preoccupation of human races from the creation either by translation or adaptation. Timothy-Asobele (2016b:196) opines this dialogue of cultures by the way of literary translation will lead to a panhuman culture.

## **7. Significance of Literary Adaptations in Nigerian Modern Drama and Literature**

The literary adaptation of Western classical texts to Nigerian cultural milieu particularly to the drama sub-genre is very significant. The turning point in modern Nigerian drama is traceable to the work of Ola Rotimi in 1968 when he adapted Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* of 430 BCE to a Nigerian drama with the title, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* which became a success in Nigerian literature and across national boundaries. The Esan Oladapo's *Teleda L'ase* in 2004 was adapted from the same *Oedipus Rex*. The celebrated Duro Ladipo's *Aare Akogun* in 1970 was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603). On these findings, literary adaptation is found to be significant to the growth and development of the Nigerian literature, modern drama in particular.

The works of playwrights such as Soyinka's *The Bacchae* (1973), adapted from *Le Bacchae of Euripides* of 410 BCE, Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* (1978) adapted from Nicola Gogol's *The Government Inspector* of 1836, Zulu Sofola's *The Wizard of Law* (1975) adapted from the *Farce* of Pierre Panthelin in the fourteenth century, Ahmed Yerima's *An Inspector Calls* (2002) was a rereading of Priestly's *An Inspector Calls* of 1945 and Bode Sowande's *Arede Owo* (1990), a Yoruba adaptation of Moliere's *l'Avare* of 1668 all continue to play a significant role in the growth and development of modern drama in which Nigerian cultural diversities are animated and are over the years listed among the annals of world literature.

Included in the list are Ola Rotimi in 1968 adapted Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* of 430 BCE and Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* to Nigerian cultural milieu with the title; *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Esan Oladapo adapted the same work with the title *Teleda L'ase* in 2004. Duro Ladipo's *Aare Akogun* in 1970 and Wale Ogunyemi's *Aare Akogun* in 1969 were respectively adapted from Shakespeare's *Othello* of 1603 and *Macbeth* of 1623. These adaptations place the Nigerian cultural values on the global scene. They are re-readings of literary works from other climes in the light of Yoruba socio-cultural belief which further project their heritage and patrimony

Significantly, it must be mentioned here that prominent among Nigerian dramatists who engaged and are still engaging with the adaptationist approach in his literary works is Wole Soyinka. He traded the tool of adaptation in many of his works in promoting African culture and aesthetics among the world literature by adapting Western texts to the Nigerian context. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1986, the first African and Nigerian to be so awarded. This is a major contribution to the global value of Nigerian literature, drama and the Yoruba cultural patrimony in particular in the international literary discourse.

## 8. Conclusion

In this study, the aesthetics and the influence of literary adaptation as well as its significance to Nigerian modern drama were examined. The paper also revealed that adaptation of Western texts to the Nigerian cultural milieu has played a significant role in the evolution and the development of theatre and modern drama in Nigeria. The study concludes that literary adaptation is a product of intellectual creativity in a cross-cultural dialogue among nations of many cultural diversities. It argues that literary adaptation does not equal inferiority but is a creative process of cultural interrogation and dialogue with a national colouration which has contributed immensely to the growth of French literature and comparative cultural studies in Nigeria. The paper further established literary adaptations of Western canons is the basis upon which the Nigerian modern drama attained its global essence. Although this discussion literarily focuses on concept, theory and significance of literary adaptation in modern Nigerian drama. However, there is a need for further studies to identify the differences between the two concepts that seem conflictual: Modern Nigerian Drama and Nigerian Modern Drama.

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