



The Nexus between Ideological and Thematic Preoccupations in the Deployment of Folkloric Expressions in Tunde Fatunde's *La calebasse cassée*

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Abstract. One of the major responsibilities of literary writers is to right the perceived inappropriateness in human societies for the purpose of socio-economic, cultural, and political development. Many creative writers of the post-independent period, especially in Africa, attempt to strike a balance between their ideological stance and the thematic preoccupations in their artistic works. It appears that less attention has been paid to the use of folkloric expressions in the discharge of the author's ideology and preoccupations. This study, therefore, examines the deployment of folkloric traditions in Tunde Fatunde's *La calebasse cassée* to illustrate the relationship between the writer's point of view and the moral lessons he wished his readers could pick from his literary work. Tunde Fatunde's *La calebasse cassée* is purposively chosen for this study because of the playwright's inclination toward the social transformation agenda he has for human society. The French «*explication de texte*» is adopted as the methodology and Marxism serves as the theoretical framework for the study. Findings reveal that Tunde Fatunde's *La calebasse cassée* exposes a binary opposition between the poor and the rich, and it presents religion as a false consciousness, a repressive ideology that brainwashes the poor which makes them stupid or at least modest to a fault and cheap to manipulate. The study concludes that Fatunde's play, *La calebasse cassée* is a mockery of capitalism and/or neo-colonialism in African States, particularly in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ideology, thematic preoccupations, folkloric expressions, Marxism, Ogundokun

1. Introduction

Marxism advocates for equality, fairness and a balanced society in terms of the production and distribution of resources (wealth) of a given society. The rejection of religion and spiritualism is pertinent to the Marxists because it is believed that religion has been misused to brainwash man and to control his mind to his disadvantage. The issue of woman emancipation is equally taken seriously by the Marxists because it is hoped that the liberation of womenfolk will contribute significantly to the development of a given society socioeconomically and politically.

Applying Marxist theory to literature; there is an established dialectical connection between the content and the context of literary expressions. The content is the message of a text and the context implies the style, the form, or the technique applied in putting the text together. The content is often drawn from the social life of the people and the society presented in the arts. The style is informed by the social life itself which may sometimes be conditioned by the existing forces of nature and humans in a particular society.

Marxists see the issues of economic power, class conflict, materialism, and spirituality as the bone of contention in human societies. To them, literature, as a form of art, is a means of expressing a class struggle. Literary production is, therefore, a matter of personal and social expression. It is sufficient to say that each class in a society produces its own literature and art. In other words, there is evidence of class consciousness in Marxist texts.

Karl Marx (1978: 54) defines ideology as “the mental attitude, consciousness or set of ideas that the ruling class held consciously. This consciousness was held in their self-interest and their set of ideas was institutionalized as a social system.” One could then say that ideology is a shared principle of a social group. Ideology allows people, as members of a group, to organize the multitude of social beliefs about what is the case, good or bad, wrong, for them and to act accordingly (Teun, 1998: 8). Tsao (2001: 2), however, views ideology as “a set of beliefs about the world, including beliefs about the morality of the division of labor, income distribution, and the existing structure of a society.” From the three perspectives on what the concept of ideology represents, one is convinced to put it that ideology is the worldview, beliefs, guiding rules, and organizational principles of people who belong to the same social group within a system.

The concept of thematic preoccupation can be interpreted as an author’s intended and focused pedagogical values of his/her subject matter (s). The message of a piece of art through which a target audience learns some moral lessons which could shape, reshape, direct and, or redirect the affairs of their life as members of society. Every literary creation, either real or imaginary, is never a story in a vacuum. There should be a theme or two that often teach certain moral lessons to readers, viewers, or listeners. Writers’ ideological positions and their intentions to write what they have written are, most often than not, interconnected. A creative writer’s ideological position can be understood when the theoretical framework on which his/her story is premised. It is, however, important to add that two or more theories might provide the basis for a given literary text if they share some traits. For example, Marxism, Feminism, Postcolonialism / Neocolonialism, or Orientalism could be identified in a single literary text.

Folkloric expressions stand out as one major stylistic element a modern critic could study in an African literary text, to investigate the link between a given writer’s ideology and his/her theme(s) which envelope his/her motive. Folklore is the raw talent through which cultural practices are displayed, expressed, and sustained in form of songs, chants, dance steps, drama, story-telling, and proverbs among other things. Ajuwon (1995: 306) observes:

Pre-literate Nigeria once enjoyed a verbal art civilization which, at its high point, was warmly patronized by traditional rulers and the general public. At a period when writing was unknown, the oral medium served the people as a bank for the

preservation of their ancient experiences and beliefs. Much of the evidence that related to the past of Nigeria, therefore, could be found in oral tradition.

According to Gimblett (1998: 327), folklore means “the study of a particular mode of cultural production which focuses more on oral tradition and less on aural reception.” However, the concern of this study is not to determine the potency of oral tradition or that of aural reception rather, it is to exploit any form of folkloric expressions as to how they impact a writer’s ideology and his/her theme(s). In the making of African literary texts, orature which is the mediated or documented form of oral tradition plays a significant role. Okpewho (1990: 83) when giving his take on folklore explains:

The literary or artistic quality of oral literature was underplayed and undermined by foreign scholars who have little or no feelings for languages and the attitudes in which that literature was expressed. It was only inevitable that, when these African nations won their independence from foreign domination, they undertook to reexamine and overhaul not only the institution by which they had been governed but also the image of their culture that had long been advertised by outsiders. The aim was to demonstrate that Africa had since time immemorial traditions that should be respected and a culture to be proud of.

From the aforementioned, Okpewho attempts to deconstruct the insensitivity of the Whites as regards Africans and their cultural heritage. Culture is the people; there is no how a people can be separated from their culture since it is the totality of their ways of life. Iyasere (1975: 107) is of the opinion that “the modern African writer is to his indigenous oral tradition as a snail is to its shell. Even in a foreign habitat, a snail never leaves its shell behind.” For instance, in many of his artistic works, Wole Soyinka references Yoruba gods such as Ogun, Sango, and Orisanla. To buttress this point, Okpewho (1990: 91) notes:

The exploration of African oral literacy tradition attains perhaps its most intense and skillful level in the work of Wole Soyinka. In a number of his plays, in some of his poems, and definitely in his novels, he has borrowed heavily from Yoruba mythology especially the aspects of it that narrate the relationship between divinities... for Soyinka the basic elements of the Yoruba outlook of life.

2. Analysis

Analyzing the nexus between ideological and thematic preoccupations in the deployment of folkloric expressions in Tunde Fatunde’s *La*

calebasse cassée, the use of proverbs, metaphors and story-telling techniques shall be considered in this study.

2.1 The deployment of proverbs

The use of proverbs is crucial in the inculcation of cultural norms and values of a given group of people called a tribe, an ethnic group, or a linguistic community. Gulere (2000: 3) opines that:

Proverbs and riddles are some of the commonly applied forms of orature in day-to-day communications among serious-minded people. Whether in song, story recital, or statement, they make a person wiser, more sociable, happier, and more respectable in society.

Similarly, literary critics such as Malunga and Banda (2004), suggest that proverbs identify and dignify a culture. They express the collective wisdom of the people; reflect their thinking patterns, values, and behavior. From the aforementioned, the following facts are obvious about proverbs: they are elements of cultural heritage; they are words of wisdom; they clarify vision; they reduce tension through humor; they create strong imagery; the message contents of proverbs are not always disputed; and; they often influence people to actions.

In a purely African context, proverbs are described as wise sayings to unlock wisdom, clarify vision and unify different perceptions of different people on varieties of issues. Because some proverbs contain witty expressions, they add humor to discussions and thereby reduce tension on practical sensitive issues. They can again be used to build relationships and promote institutions. They often create strong images which can galvanize people into action. Most often people tend to regard proverbial assumptions as credible because they tend to express proven conclusions of sorts (see Ogundokun, 2015 & 2017). As a matter of fact, a proverb is capable of introducing an idea, developing an argument, and teaching a moral lesson as well as resolving a conflict. Hence, in an ideological text- a poem, a play, or a novel, proverbs are used to express themes like love, subjugation, war, corruption, oppression, gender inequality, and others.

Let us consider some proverbs used by the playwright in *La calebasse cassée* with a view to examining the writer's ideology and his themes.

Le fermier apeuré qui croise un lion affamé risque de s'évaporer ... (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 1).

The playwright is warning African leaders that the frightened farmer who comes across a hungry lion

runs the risk of being consumed. In this context, the bad leaders are the farmers while the downtrodden is to him the lions. It is believed that in a true democracy, power lies in the hands of the people as politics is a game of numbers where the majority carries both the vote and the day. Being a Marxist, Fatunde is on the side of the poor masses in his ideological disposition and thematic orientation.

Quand on pleure, on voit tout de même (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 1)

It is true that when we cry, we still see. This proverb expresses the self-awareness of the less privileged. It appears as a warning to the oppressive privileged elites that the fact that the poor are passing through hardship does not mean that they are blind or insensitive to their fundamental human rights. Despite their plights, the poor have their minds intact and are battle-ready to take their destiny into their hands when the time comes.

Quand on nage, on essaie d'ouvrir les yeux afin d'éviter les écueils (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 1) When we swim, we try to open our eyes to avoid pitfalls.

This proverbial expression also gives a warning to the ruling class that the downtrodden are fully conscious of their multi-dimensional challenges. Hence, they are systematically waiting for a payback time to take their own pound of flesh from the capitalists, neo-colonialists, and their associates.

Tous les poisons ont le même regard innocent, mais personne ne sait ce qu'ils pensent (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 11)

Different types of fish have the same innocent look, but no one knows what they are thinking. Almost all African leaders are suspected to be deceitful in their practices and actions. Therefore, the writer describes them as "innocent-looking" but dangerous fellows whom no man knows their inner minds. Some of these leaders smile at their people by day but poison them at night with repressive policies and presidential or executive orders. "Quelq'un le sourit le jour et il t'empoisonne la nuit" (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 11). However, the leaders are reminded of the transient nature of power in this world which makes the power does not last forever in the hand of a person or a group of people.

Un chat qui prétend être ami finira, un jour, par manger la viande de la fête si la porte de la cuisine n'est pas bien fermée (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 12)

A cat that pretends to be a friend will one day end up eating the meat of the party if the kitchen door is not closed properly. In the context of this proverb and as

intended by the playwright, a cat symbolizes the foreign investors, with their capitalist tendencies, who pretend to be helping Africans but are milking heavily the continent's natural and human resources instead. With the use of this folkloric expression, the writer captures his Marxist ideology and the theme of anti-neocolonialism.

Une poule sans dent sait comment se protéger (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 14)

A toothless chicken knows how to protect itself. By and large, the playwright sees the downtrodden as chickens that have no teeth but know how to defend themselves when the occasion arises. This statement once again shows that Fatunde picks tent with the poor masses and serves as their spokesperson.

Un chien enragé oublie de protéger son maître (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 22)

A mad dog forgets to protect its master. This playwright of Marxist orientation uses his art to warn African dictators that it is possible that one day, their so-called defense line could break down and provide no support for them to survive. Those mad dogs the writer is referring to are the military formations and other security agencies. Experiences have shown that in some African countries, there are coup d'états where the military often violently sack the elected and constituted governments, even in recent times.

Le chasseur qui agite le nid d'abeilles rentrera chez lui le visage enflé (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 23)

The hunter who shakes the honeycomb will return home with a swollen face. The writer refers to the oppressive leaders as hunters here and the masses as the bees. Then, hunters that invade the bees' abode will not go home peacefully because they shall be stung by the angry bees. Fatunde is indirectly warning the corrupt and dictatorial rulers and their associates to heed advice because no one will be able to control the masses when they are ready to vent their anger on their oppressors or perceived enemies. The case of the French revolution of 1789 and other mass protests are testimonies of the writer's point of view. One also remembers a popular song that is always sung at protests or during mass actions: **"How many people do soldiers go kill"**.

La pluie qui tombe dans une rivière ressert du sol sous la forme d'une source (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 24)

The rain that falls in a river recovers from the ground in the form of a spring. This folkloric expression which is enveloped in this proverb reveals the success of the poor people who have triumphed over their oppressors. Towards the end of the play, all the corrupt leaders are rounded up, exposed and

surrendered their loot. This act of ceding their ill-gotten assets and illegal wealth to the State by the culprits is what the author compared to the rain which falls into the river that goes back to its original source.

3. The Use of Metaphoric Expressions

In literary compositions, metaphoric expressions serve as both literary devices and stylistic elements. The deployment of this writing format permits writers to arrive at name-calling. A metaphor is a direct comparison where one thing is called another name without the use of the word "like" or the expression "as--as". For example, if one says, the man is a devil. In connecting his ideological position with his thematic preoccupation, here are examples of metaphoric expressions Fatunde uses in his play, *La calebasse cassée*:

La calebasse cassée, the title of the play is in itself metaphoric. The playwright underscores the failed nature of the African States that have broken into several pieces socioeconomically, politically, and otherwise as a result of misrule; oppressiveness of the capitalist order. *La calebasse* which literally means calabash is a metaphor for the continent of Africa. Hence, *La calebasse cassée*, symbolizes the African continent which has already shattered on different fronts. In the words of Sabine, hero's wife, "La calebasse est cassée en plusieurs morceaux et il sera désormais difficile de la recoller", p. 37. The calabash is broken into several pieces and it will be unfortunately difficult to mend or put those pieces together.

The play, *La calebasse cassée*, mirrors the situation in the postcolonial African State where everything is already aground. Almost all aspects of human life are shattered and reduced to nothingness. Things have fallen apart and there is no hope in sight. This symbolic play is a metaphor for an imaginary African country that is bewitched by many follies and vices ranging from corrupt practices and conspiracy against the State and her citizenry, as well as woman's oppression, to take the centre stage. In short, the story is a demonstration of neocolonialism in post-independent Africa.

Un homme restera toujours le lion de sa maison (A man will always remain the lion of his house, *La calebasse cassée*, p.16).

This statement, "A man will always remain the lion of his house", explains the male chauvinism and dictatorial nature of African elites and their collaborators. They over-dominate the poor masses

especially the women by hiding under unacceptable beliefs which present women as weaker vessels. Eteki proudly expresses his anti-feminism by saying; “Cette histoire de libération de la femme doit prendre fin aujourd’hui. Un homme restera toujours le lion de sa maison. Sinon c’est le désastre” (p. 16). The protagonist who represents the ruling and the privileged class holds that a man is the power broker of his family and of course of his society. Hence, he wants any idea of women’s liberation to be aborted right away. He sees women’s emancipation as a disaster if not put to an end.

However, for the playwright who is a social critic and a freedom fighter, Fatunde is of the view that women’s liberation is crucial to the development of a society. For example, the writer empowered his female character Sabine, the protagonist’s wife educationally and economically. With this empowerment, when Eteki refuses to pay his driver for three months, Sabine picks up and pays the bills. The action of Sabine here proves that women’s liberation is a necessity and a task that must be accomplished. There is a common saying which says; “if you train a woman, you train a nation”. The motherly and caring nature of Sabine by paying Joseph, Eteki’s driver his unpaid salaries, makes the man reveal his master’s infidelity and sexual escapes to Sabine.

Joseph: C’est devenu une habitude. C’est une pratique courante. Je connais au moins cinq femmes différentes qui préparent à manger pour mon patron. Elles ne cessent de lui téléphoner. Parfois le patron se plaint d’être trop déranger par ces femmes. Mais il est toujours content d’aller chez elles (*La calebasse cassée*, p. 7).

Joseph exposes his master by telling the wife that he knows at least five different women who often prepare food for Eteki, his boss and that they always disturb the man with their calls yet his master often visits them with happiness. This ugly practice is common among African politicians and office-holders who are married but always keep a chain of concubines. This practice can be interpreted as another form of women oppression and discrimination. Therefore, one could rightly say that the writer x-rays the theme of women emancipation in this play.

Ces femmes savants! (These learned women! *La calebasse cassée*, p. 20)

Again, as it has been pointed out earlier, in the characterization of his play, Fatunde assigns significant roles to his female characters. Sabine, the hero’s wife, and Salimatou, Njoya’s wife is well

educated and gainfully employed. They are not presented as objects, sex tools, or good for nothing. It is as a result that they have been painted as “femmes savants!” which implies learned/wise women. The evidence of their wisdom is demonstrated in the play by making Eteki’s driver reveal the infidelity of his master and by exposing the unfaithful pastor. The sinful pastor name Kolinga is a cohort of Mr Eteki. He knows about all the atrocities and criminalities committed by the protagonist. Unfortunately, he often uses religion to deceive people in order to manipulate them and enrich himself. Condemning the use of religion as a false consciousness, Ngugi (1980: 51) affirms:

Christianity, for instance, had always been used by the colonial system to rationalize inequalities; the colonial state encouraged that brand of Christianity that abstracted heaven from earthly struggles. So, Mau Mau took the same Christian songs and even the Bible, and interpreted them for themselves, giving these values and meaning in harmony with the aspirations of their struggles. Officially approved Christians sang of a host of angels in heaven. They sang of a spiritual journey in a spiritual, intangible universe where a metaphysical, disembodied evil and good were locked in perpetual spiritual warfare for the human soul.

Fatunde like other Marxists does not believe that religion is so important to the advancement of human society. He believes that religion is a repressive ideology that renders poor people powerless and more miserable. Truly, in most African countries, pastors are living big; in mansions with luxurious cars and jeeps. Some of them even own private jets. The colleges and universities the pastors build with poor people’s money cannot be attended by the children of the poor masses who form the bulk of their congregations in different churches. Do not forget, those poor people are the major contributors to the churches. This idea of robbing Peter to pay Paul is frowned upon by Fatunde in *La calebasse cassée* through the character of Kolingba, the pastor. ...Un vrai cochon (... a real pig, *La calebasse cassée*, p. 56). Earlier in the story, Njoya, Eteki’s son has described his father a pig (...mon père pue comme un cochon qui patauge dans la boue, *La calebasse cassée*, p. 9).

Eteki, the protagonist of the play, is referred to as a true pig in this context, to x-ray the level of his involvement in unclean practices such as corruption and infidelity. For instance, he conspired with the President of his country and his foreign associates to

loot his country and enrich themselves at the expense of the whole country.

Besides, at the expense of his immediate family and those who are working for him, Eteki spends a lot of money on several girlfriends and concubines. He is unable to pay his driver and does not give money to his wife for domestic purposes. All these are dirty engagements and the tenor which exists between his behaviors and the animal called the pig gives room for the metaphor which describes him. For Fatunde, every African leader who is insensitive to the plights of the innocent masses is a pig; dirty and unkept even with regard to promises as a political office-holder or an individual at the corridor of power. With the deployment of this metaphor, Fatunde's ideological disposition (Marxism) and the theme of neo-colonialism (man's inhumanity to man, political oppression, and inequality) are expressed.

4. The adoption of the story-telling technique

This writing technique allows an author to narrate another story within a particular story. It often provides a communalistic view of issues. It could also be conversational in its style. Story-telling can give a kind of flashback to current events or actions. And Tsegaye (2019: 2) notes:

In literature, flashbacks are incredibly useful for different objectives. It is linked to the author's purpose. The writer may opt for various aims, understanding characters' relationships and backgrounds, understanding a character's motivations and perspective, disrupting the chronological line or order of a narrative for more depth and complexity, creating surprise or suspense, giving clues or hints to remember which foreshadow future events enhancing understanding of an important theme or idea.

In the play under review, Fatunde adopts story-telling technique to achieve the following purposes, namely; understanding characters' relationships and backgrounds, understanding a character's motives and perspective, creating suspense, and giving clues to remember a certain experience that predicts future events and thereby enhancing understanding of an important theme or idea which explains his ideological point of view. An instance of a story within a story in Fatunde's play, *La calebasse cassée* can be found on pages 60 – 61

Eteki : Peu importe ! L'homme est plus égoïste que grégaire. Nous cherchons tous à nous mettre à l'abri de la misère. Mon grand-père était un serf à la cour

royale dans notre village. Il s'est échappé pour se réfugier en ville. Mon père, un illettré, était un pauvre ouvrier au port maritime. Il a économisé pour m'envoyer à l'école coloniale. Et j'ai réussi à avoir une bourse pour étudier en Suisse où j'ai rencontré mon ami Pierre. J'ai passé ma vie en faisant en sorte que ma famille ne souffre pas. Ma famille vit mieux par rapport à celles de mon père et de mon grand-père, et maintenant au nom d'un soi-disant ? Tu veux que je cède à l'Etat toute ma richesse ici et en Suisse ? ... (*La calebasse cassée*, pp. 60 – 61)

Eteki, the major character instead of dealing with the reality on ground, is given excuses to justify why men do some of the things they do by shipping in entirely a new story. This is what we called story within story.

The use of folkloric expressions in Tunde Fatunde's *La calebasse cassée* is to underscore his Marxist ideology and by extension, his postcolonial stance on issues affecting Africa socio-economically and politically. However, it is important to note that positive change will not yet happen without struggles; rejection of any repressive order like capitalism and neocolonialism. Ngara (1975: 31) remarks:

Social stratification and inequality are a historical part of our society and these are what Marxist writers are continually fighting against in our society. Through the change, significant attention to social structures will be made. This will come in form of a revolution which is the displacement of one rotten class by another. The sky-laden walls and narrow chambers of prison couldn't lock this strong will of life-making.

In criticizing the neocolonial tendencies of the post-independent African States, Fatunde sets the young generation against the older one to displace capitalism in the land. The youths are planning to organize a national constitutional conference to overturn the old order with a view to restructuring the country and putting it on the right track of advancement in all ramifications.

Njoya : ...Moi, j'irai témoigner à la Conférence Nationale.

Christophe: Njoya et moi, nous sommes unis dans le même combat. L'échec de la nouvelle démocratie ici risque de faire répandre la dictature même chez nous. Cela paraît peut-être impensable, mais c'est une possibilité. Je ferai tout pour que la nouvelle démocratie réussisse. Nous luttons pour un monde nouveau (*La calebasse cassée*, pp. 67 – 68).

From the extract above, it is obvious that the youths are ready to take the bull by the horns. They are

prepared to displace the old social order which is characterized by corrupt practices, oppression, and social injustices. Njoya and Christophe have resolved to drag their fathers to the National Conference and to stand as witnesses against them just to make sure the new social order works.

As we can see, the development of an inquisitive mind accounts for why a creative writer may engage the social order of their time, especially in their immediate environment or community with a view to advocating for good governance. On the issue of good governance, Ode (2013: 131) notes:

A good government would ensure that social amenities are provided, that policies which are formulated are achievable, sustainable, and consistent, and that the three arms of government remain independent of each other to enable them to act as checks and balances for each other.

Relying on Ode's perception as regards good governance, it is obvious that African countries have a long way to go. From available statistics, poor social infrastructure, corruption, unemployment, poverty, armed banditry, kidnapping, and other high-profile crimes are on the increase. As a way of suggesting solutions to the challenges in Africa, writers like Fatunde are questioning the existing social order which has made the continent of Africa stagnant for decades. (Falola, 2015: 79) observes:

The monopoly of the state to sell its own ideology has to be confronted. Knowledge must empower women, the grassroots, and civil societies to solve age-old problems of economic underdevelopment and political instability. We cannot expect to take advantage of new possibilities and opportunities if we cannot comprehend and correct the mistakes of the past.

From the foregoing, whether Africans like it or not, it is time to constructively confront the existing social order that disallows meaningful development. This is the motif of many African creative writers.

5. Conclusion

In this study, an effort has been made to present the concept of ideology as a philosophical foundation that governs a social group, an association, or a system to achieve its aim and objectives. Based on the Marxist theoretical framework, the connection between Tunde Fatunde's ideological belief and his thematic preoccupation is analyzed. Emphasis is placed on folkloric expressions such as proverbs, metaphoric expressions, and the writer's use of story within the story technique.

The playwright holds that for Africa to develop in all ramifications, the hang-over of the colonial mentality among African elites which is branded as neo-colonialism should be abolished. Women's liberation which will pave the way to women's active participation in all state matters- socio-economically and politically should be encouraged. Citizens should be allowed to enjoy their fundamental human rights and there is the need to separate religion from politics because they are two parallel concepts and they are sensitive too.

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