

# AESTHETICS CRITIQUE OF *GREAT ODOLU KINGDOM*

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## **Abstract**

This work looks at two aesthetic theories of art criticism: Imitationalism and Emotionalism, and how the play *Great Odolu Kingdom* has been able to exert impact and influence on its audience through the utilization of these concepts. The work has examined the success or otherwise of the play *Great Odolu Kingdom* by Emmy Ikanaba Unuja Idegü on the basis of its exploration of these two aesthetic theories. Content analysis and library research provided resources for this evaluative research. The verdict is that the playwright creatively explored the said theories to tell a captivating story of Nigeria as a contraption, “a misconfigured and unworkable fusion”.

**Key words:** Imitationalism, Aesthetic, Emotionalism, Content Analysis

## **Introduction**

The word aesthetics is a derivation of the Greek word ‘aisthetikos’ which means “of sense perception”. It is appreciated today as a philosophical study of the arts which examines the nature and value of arts, beauty and good taste. Also as “...a critical reflection on art culture and nature” ([www.phil.uga.edu](http://www.phil.uga.edu)). It explores the nature of beauty, art, and sensory experiences. It also scrutinizes concepts such as taste, perception, and the measures used to determine what is considered beautiful or ugly, from a judgmental angle and such judgments are subjective and can vary among individuals and cultures. The concept of beauty and ugliness is not limited to physical appearances but extends to various aspects of human experiences, including art, nature, and even moral judgments. For Hameed Olutoba,

aesthetics is simply “The organization of beauty in the work of art to produce a desired effect” (18). The subjective nature of the appreciation of aesthetics does not only favour the divergence in the judgmental perspectives on a product of art, but even reflects in the various meanings that scholars attach to the word; some meanings-deep, and some, overtly shallow. Consider Herberth Zettl’ position which simplifies the word aesthetics, he describes every slightest decision of choice to be driven by aesthetic judgments, his opinion is that...

Consciously or not, you make many aesthetic choices every day. When you decide what to wear, arrange stuff on your desk, or choose what flower to put on the dinner table, or even when you judge the speed or distance of your car relative to other cars when driving, you are engaging in the basic perceptual and aesthetic activities. Even the everyday expression “I know what I like” requires aesthetic judgment (3).

Suffice from the foregoing therefore to say that aesthetic experiences are not limited to physical objects or artworks but can also arise from interactions with nature, human behavior, and even abstract concepts. For example, a breathtaking landscape, a captivating piece of music, a moving dance performance, or an act of kindness can all elicit aesthetic responses. It is therefore not an astonishing thing to see philosophers having kin interest in its studies and of their judgment since antiquity. They have tried to understand the rationale behind the experience and judgment of what people deem beautiful and ugly and to ascertain if such judgments are legitimate. This justifies for the exploration of aesthetics beyond the realm of sensory experiences to encompass philosophical inquiries into the nature of art itself. It explores questions such as the purpose of art, the role of the artist, and the relationship between the creator, the artwork, and the audience. Aesthetic theories and movements have emerged throughout history,

each offering different perspectives on what constitutes art and how it should be evaluated.

Aesthetics criticism is a theory based evaluation of arts which examines the impact and effect that a work of art makes or has on an audience and how it is able to elicit the desired response to phenomenon or the entire work. This evaluation relies on two basic theories which are Imitationalism and Emotionalism. Imitationalism as a literary theory in aesthetics criticism judges primarily the realistic presentation or representation of a work of arts, while emotionalism on the other hand discusses the expressive qualities of an art work. Its concern is with the ability of an art work to transpose the audience into experiencing the work of art in a way that emotions, feelings, and actions (not mere words) are adequately transmitted from the author to her audience in ways so deep that Leo Tolstoy describes as “intercourse between man and man” (748). This is to say that, for a work of art to be adjudged good on the yardstick of emotionalism, such a work of art should be able to send clear messages of the right feelings to its audience, thus emotionalism as an aesthetic theory requires a strong communication of feelings, moods, or ideas from the work to audience and the capability to arouse strong emotional response from, and, in its audience.

### Synopsis of *Great Odolu Kingdom*

In *Great Odolu Kingdom*, Baba’s family with his six children face threats of division following the obvious injustice suffered by some of Baba’s children. This injustice is basically seen in the imbalance in the sharing formula of food by Baba among his children, in comparison to the inputs they each make to the big communal or family bowl. Child 1 feels most cheated as he goes with the least share of food despite putting in the largest contribution. Baba’s call for dialogue as threats of secession appears to further heighten the

agitations as the struggle to pull down the family hut continues. Child 1, 3 and 5 seem to have given up on the family but Baba's continued efforts would pay off eventually.

### **The Concept of Imitationalism**

The statement of Lucius Annaeus Seneca that "all art is but imitation of nature" (19) comes handy in this discourse. Arts is generally an imitational form. It finds substance, resources, inspiration and breeding ground from nature and society. Several arguments in social and intellectual discourses have over the years favoured the idea of art having its nexus in imitation. Essentially, most of the theories on the origin of theatre and drama acknowledge the place of imitation in the development of arts. Brockett and Hildy captures this reality while explaining the ritual theory of the origin of theatre thus: "Performers may wear costumes and masks to represent the mythical characters or supernatural forces in the rituals or in accompanying celebrations" (1). This statement is describing the imitational elements or activities inherent in the ritual theory of the origin of theatre with emphasis on 'represent'. While discussing the storytelling theory also, Brockett and Hildy equally make reference to the imitational activities thus:

The recalling of an event (a hunt, battle, or other feat) can be elaborated through the narrator's pantomime and impersonation and eventually through each role being assumed by a different person. Closely related theories see theatre as evolving out of imitation of animals or out of narrative forms of dance and song. Admiration for the performers' skill, virtuosity, and grace is seen as motivation for elaborating the activities into fully realized theatrical performances (5).

Critics of imitationalism believe that the most important thing about a work of art is the realistic presentation of subject matter. They hinge

the success of a work of art to its total resemblance and at the same time reminding the viewer of what is seen in the real world. For short, it should imitate life and, consequently, be life-like. The basis for evaluating a work of art work in Imitationalism also is the degree to which it looks real in comparison with its original copy or idea even after imputing creativity and artistic blending. An Imitationalist pays attention to creation of art that is as replicative as possible of actual subject, hence, exactness of creation is what it endorses as artistic success. The position of Plato and Aristotle captured below further corroborates this assertion:

Plato and Aristotle spoke of mimesis as the re-presentation of nature. According to Plato, all artistic creation is a form of imitation: that which really exists (in the “world of ideas”) is a type created by God; the concrete things man perceives in his existence are shadowy representations of this ideal type (<https://www.britannica.com>).

This clearly suggests the importance of fashioning an art work so that it is closely related to its original, as far as imitationalism is the yardstick for criticism. These close relationships between the original and copy (so to say) as prescribed by the imitationalist theory of arts criticism resonates with the story told in the play *Great Odolu Kingdom*.

### **Imitationalism in *Great Odolu Kingdom***

In *Great Odolu Kingdom*, the playwright succinctly represents Nigerian reality under the veil of artistic creativity, so that the most resounding conflicts presented by the playwright are relatable to the injustice reflected in the Nigerian situation. Moreover, the contribution and sharing formula in situations three and four of the play shows disunity engulfing the entire conflict, as well as distrust, stagnation and so on which are the very organic issues confronting our nation as a whole. Indeed, one does not need the services of a soothsayer to understand that the same conflicts bedevilling *Great Odolu Kingdom* are

either the same as those polarizing Nigeria or at least have a semblance of the problems of Nigeria. However, we cannot divorce the fact that imitation of real life situations make up the bunch of beautiful artistic presentations which have been tested in the refinery of the creativity. For instance, the characters unflinchingly echoed the same inflammatory statements copiously ditched out by actors of, especially, the political scene against one another when power sharing arrangements are skewed to place one group ahead of another.

The playwright's purposeful reproduction of the characters leaves a clear clue that connect similar characters in the Nigeria context. One of the very remarkable representations is of the idea of the Baba of *Great Odolu Kingdom* as having six children, which clearly refers to the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. What again conveys intriguing palpability about the playwright's choice of characters is the fact that a careful readership of the play text can afford the reader the chance of being able to categorically identify, not only the section of the country they hail from but also their respective closet zones. This, the playwright makes possible through their arguments, styles and perhaps, gesticulations. We see in them the oppressor benefactor against the oppressed who is dissatisfied with the status quo. The character of *Baba* commands a certain degree of plurality, namely, a fatherly figure symbolizing a sitting president who, desirous of victory over forces of division, might have thought that the country should not go into fractions under his watch. So we see Nigeria personified in the character of *Baba* attempting to reveal his thoughts on the hullabaloo perpetuated by his children, as he clearly bears the brunt, makes real the idea that 'uneasy lies the head that wears the crown'.

More reminiscent is the allusion to the dialogue, intended to calm nerves, in its initial conception, but ends up as almost rekindling an already fiery furnace, which, incidentally, underscores the national dialogue organized at the tail end of the GoodLuck Jonathan's

administration. Just like Jonathan, *Baba*, seeing that *Great Odolu Kingdom*, like Nigeria, is at the precipice of disintegration, or, another bloody civil war, he allows reason to prevail: the same way *Baba* remains committed to truce despite his recognition of the difficulty for peaceful coexistence in the in the present situation. The language employed by the playwright especially the elaborate use of proverbs is highly characteristic of the Nigerian language culture. The playwright makes it more real by first casting the proverbs in native tongues, followed by their English translations such as “*omiagwugwufo akan* meaning, plain water can never stay on its own and become sour. A foreign substance must have entered it” (p.4) among a plethora of other such renditions of indigenous tongues spread all over the play.

The playwright uses *Spectacle* to present an interesting picture of members of same community in equal number with the six characters named as children of *Baba*. These figures who, in the dark, engage in tussles are frozen with the appearance of light to depict the Nigerian scenario where many preach peace in the open but engage in war of attrition in the dark. The costume depiction equally makes for great and representative spectacle, each with their style of dress to show differences though coexisting in the same society. This is a replica of the multi ethnicity of the cultures of Nigeria. Especially as represented by some of the major groups that represent the six geopolitical zones. The playwright accurately captures the character of *Baba* as symbolic of a sickly, weak and tired or frustrated old figure taking cue from the current sorry state of Nigeria. He successfully creates an animated symbol for Nigeria, which, in its own self, being inanimate but with animated occupiers, cannot speak for itself. And, to a reasonable extent, the character of *Baba* imitates a frustrated yet hopeful sitting president who believes that a proper dialogue would turn things for the better. It is obvious from the ensuing altercation among the six children, as exemplified in the Nigerian context, there is disgust, distrust and loss

of faith from a majority of the groups as represented herein. Interestingly, the posture of the ‘oppressors’ exemplified in the characters of Child 2 and Child 4, is that of continuing the contraption that benefits them above others. A clear example hangs carelessly in the utterances of Child 4 in the dialogue episode thus:

You use the rope of ame to tie ame, that is why we climb the palm tree with oga, made from the palm tree itself. Somehow we found ourselves as members of this great family with little or no effort of ours. We should therefore settle with the realities of our inseparability and forge ahead” (21).

Suffice to say from the foregoing, that the playwright’s application of emotionalism as an aesthetic theory of criticism is successfully and professionally done.

### **Emotionalism in *Great Odolu Kingdom***

In *Great Odolu Kingdom*, the playwright attempts to tickle the emotions of his audience with the voices on and off stage reminiscing the many unheard voices of the masses that die with the darkness of oppression and the few elitist cum oppressor’s loudly heard voices conversant with the Nigerian scenery. This action brings anxiety, confusion and fear. This is quite replicative of the banter among various organs of our national psyche; disagreement from the oppressed unheard multitude and chants of agreement from the few privileged benefactors, as the circumstance may suggest. ‘Situation One’ conscientiously re-enacts disagreements that almost always graduate into attacks and attendant reprisals, powered by the background voices of those sponsoring and directing the imbroglio from the comfort of their homes; most of whom are acclaimed religious leaders and politicians who tend to do little to dissuade agitations. Rather they do more to fuel crises. As an off-shoot of this scenario, the playwright further recreates the scourge of lamentation after the fact at individual and private scales where citizens are thrown into mourning and silent

leaking of their own wounds, when everything said and done goes wrong. Thence, the song of sorrow is pretentiously sung in public by propagators of the conflicts while the emotional songs of sorrow, in their actuality, emanates from the actual sufferers from 'the big bang' claiming lives and maiming many.

The playwright's choice of musical lyrics and deliberate instructions on tempo and rhythm at strategic points in the course of the play is intentionally designed to arouse emotions of hope, hopelessness, pity, anxiety, emotional trauma and irritation in respective subjective and contextual dramatic applications. The calculated weaving of the theme song into the action of the play at relevant point also further plunges the audience into the mood, both of the moment and of the entire play. The happenings in Situation 6 and the subsequent injection of the theme song towards the end of the episode definitely leaves the audience in deep anxiety as to whether or not the family hut of the great Odolu kingdom will stand.

Again the stage picture leaves the audience with another degree of great shades of emotional trauma resonated by ethnocentric connivances of one group against the other, presumably, perceived enemies, in the same household. The picture of the six children putting their heads together... in aggressive firmness to each position (60) speaks no language than that of division and acrimony representative of our Nigerian character of ethnic agenda. The pain is further aggravated by the obvious display of nonchalance on what becomes of a battered Baba, which actively crafts the plundering of Nigeria by various ethnic groupings to their individual advantage with reckless abandon; what becomes of our fatherland (Baba) after this spate of wreckage is never fashioned into their contemplation.

The playwright takes the audience down memory lane to the events that occasioned the twilight of the Goodluck Ebelle Jonathan's administration, sometime closing-up to between 2013 and 2014, where discordance chatted the way forward for Nigeria via a proposition for a cohesive national dialogue. The events will remain a source of grave emotional pool for those conversant with the happenings of the time

and, the fruits generated from those discordant tones being ‘enjoyed’ by Nigeria and her citizens since thereafter, like the Witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* who planned to meet again “when the hurly burly’s done, when the battle’s lost and won” ([www.bartleby.com](http://www.bartleby.com)), and we are all witnesses to the aftermath. This is plain from the image of the nation in the now being battered and distended. At the time, just like Baba, almost always spot-lighted in the play, Jonathan, as well as his supporters existed as lone rangers and mercilessly treated as undignified.

There is a profound depiction of emotional pain as the audience hear Baba himself attesting to and describing his own union as a faulty amalgamation that has got his own children “trapped ...in the...marriage of convenience” (p.4) and the submission of one of the children that “...it is not working and it will never work” (p.6) affirms the degree of despair visualizing Nigeria, even today. Therefore, to qualify Nigeria as contraption is a very deep expression of hopelessness and, clearly captures one of the most familiar terminologies often explored by dissatisfied Nigerian populace. The positions of the different groups in the play are relative to the general feelings of those groups of Nigerians that feel unjustly treated, making it easy for the audience to connect emotionally with the story. The author however, through the lines of Child Six, attempts to instill the feeling of hopefulness of a better tomorrow when he sees the current nightmares as obvious shadows of challenges taking the stance that “there is light at the end of the tunnel” (p.8).

The playwright’s consistency in depicting the situation one does suppose a lack of dynamism but an artistic ploy to exhibit the existence of Nigeria in a circling spot without progressive motion, displaying its unproductivity. Nothing ever, or seem like, changing for the better. He further reminisces arguments of both productivity and contribution to the national treasury as well as the much debated unjust sharing formula. On this, the playwright illuminates the trauma of certain sections of the country who spawn the young frogs for the crocodile to devour. The pains and sufferings of the affected people are

unmistakably primed in this play, like none other before. It brings forth the feelings of the people facing this spate of injustice; the bedrock of secessionist agitations within our idealistic world of *Great Odolu Kingdom* like Nigeria's case.

The playwright also gradually heightens the crisis situation to a point where the audience begin to drown in the imaginations of the uproars that usually characterise the proposition of a national dialogue, or conference by a sitting government. The moment Baba elects to host a dialogue by saying the words: "...now let me hear everyone speak his or her own mind" (P.20: Situation Five), the anger and dissatisfaction exhibited by Child 1 in response to Baba's call for dialogue awakens the consciousness of the audience to an earlier act of injustice he (Child 1) experienced during the food sharing session. Recall similar conditions of injustice experienced by groups in the Nigerian political ecology, and the attendant cries for justice. Thus, the actions as described in the play possess the ability to communicate emotions to the audience the same way that words do; yet with a stronger thrust.

## Conclusion

Despite differentials in angle of perception and focus of the two schools of criticism, what is made obvious as well as of interest is, they all make aesthetic criticism of drama or work of art a holistically interesting endeavour. Apparently, there seem to be no work of art without a touch on one or more critical theories of aesthetics just as exemplified in *Great Odolu Kingdom*. It is clear from the analysis so far that the playwright arguably consciously romanced with various aesthetic theories including some that were not studied in this work. The emotions of love, hate sympathy, joy, happiness or the likes, either in the positive or negative are usually of great consequence in the creation of any work of art. Also, the context of imitation is another undeniable and unavoidable ingredient in the work of art. Whatever is made or created, like Plato and Aristotle conclude is a copy from a copy: even if conceived independently, it is still an idea

gotten from phenomena that humans are conversant with; a copy God's creation.

Suffice to say therefore, that the playwright has creatively explored various aesthetic theories to achieve a beautiful artistic ensemble in the play *Great Odolu Kingdom*.

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