

*Dynamics of Distancing in Nigerian Drama: A Functional Approach to Metatheatre.* By

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Reviewed by Kene Igweonu, Canterbury Christ Church University,

kene.igweonu@canterbury.ac.uk

*Dynamics of Distancing* by Nadia Anwar delivers an insightful examination of both the historical and conceptual perspectives to metatheatre in Nigerian drama by applying Bertolt Brecht's principle of dramatic distancing and Thomas J. Scheff's notion of optimum distancing to a range of seminal plays by selected first, second and third generations of post-independence Nigerian playwrights. The plays and playwrights selected are, for first generation post-independence playwrights, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1984) and *King Baabu* (2002) by the 1986 Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, and Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988). For second generation playwrights, Anwar opts for Femi Osofisan, arguably the most important playwright of that generation, and examines two of his plays namely *The Chattering and the Song* (1977) and *Women of Owu* (2006). Lastly, Anwar selects *Hangmen Also Die* (1989) by Esiaba Irobi and *A Play That Was Never To Be* (1988) by Stella Oyedepo to represent third generation playwrights.

The first two chapters provides the critical context for the rest of the book and puts forward a case for applying the concept of distancing as a metatheatrical framework for understanding Nigerian drama, which she argues does 'not produce distancing by compromising the emotional involvement and subsequent catharsis' (p. 15). Anwar devotes Chapters 3, 4 and 5 to each of the three playwrights, representing the first and second generations, and justifies her choice of two plays by each playwright by arguing that she limited her selection to 'one [play] from an earlier phase of their career and one that is

comparatively recent, so that the evolution of their styles can also be examined' (p. XIII). In Chapter 6, Anwar shifts to third generation playwrights and examines one play from each of the two selected 'in order to highlight their experimentation with dramatic form in covering a wide range of everyday issues' (p. XIII). Anwar argues that their experimentations are underpinned by metatheatrical techniques that 'can be traced back to the traditional modes of African performance' (p. 169), such as Irobi's use of flashbacks, foreshadowing, mime and role-play which works to 'disrupt the linear flow of theatrical time' (p. 169).

The book presents a compelling argument to suggest that some of the notable differences between Brechtian and indigenous Nigerian dramatic principles can only be understood in relation to the varied historical, sociocultural and religious contexts in which they operate. The book foregrounds what Anwar identifies as the cognitive and emotional dimensions of Nigerian dramatic aesthetics and examines how metatheatrical distancing strategies are employed by Nigerian dramatists to create an interactive space where the audience can exercise their emotional and cognitive capacities as both spectator and participant or, in the term popularized by Augusto Boal, as spect-actors. She notes, for instance, that 'the success of the selected texts lies not only in their potential to engender intellectual activity in an audience but also in their appeal to the emotions owing to their sensually rich and dynamic quality' (p. 205). While not unique to Nigerian drama, it is this inherent cognitive and emotional dimensions that she posits as useful frameworks for understanding how audiences encounter and receive Nigerian drama. This is based on what she articulates as Leopold Senghor's 'insistence on emotions as the defining feature of African heritage and identity' as distilled from his 'I feel, therefore I am' response to the Cartesian philosophical proposition 'I think, therefore I am' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, quoted in p. 205).

*Dynamics of Distancing* makes a hugely profound contribution to Nigerian, indeed African, theatre scholarship. A clear strength of the book is the variety of Nigerian plays used as case studies, as well as Anwar's methodical examination of an area of study that is acutely underrepresented in African theatre scholarship. Anwar goes beyond the prevailing reading of Nigerian drama from a postcolonial perspective, as being predominantly socio-political, to consider it from its cognitive and emotional perspectives, while at the same time affirming the reliance of Nigerian literary drama tradition represented by her chosen dramatists and plays on indigenous performance forms such as the *Mmonwu* and *Egungun* masquerade traditions of the Igbo and Yoruba peoples of eastern and western Nigeria respectively.

*Dynamics of Distancing* will provide readers with an insightful and unique view of Nigerian drama drawn from a variety of compelling and seminal plays. Overall, it constitutes a significant and much valued contribution to Nigerian theatre scholarship. The book is a must read for anyone interested in Nigerian drama and its affective potential.