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**POETICS OF THE ABSURD IN OLA ROTIMI'S *HOLDING TALKS*:
A MANUAL FOR DIRECTORS**

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ABSTRACT

The study analyzes Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks* directorially. In the analysis, the study places the play on its proper aesthetic base. The study is aimed at directors and theatre practitioners who might find this interpretation useful and as a guide for further practical theatre projects from a directorial perspective. The study consequently explains the thematic concepts of *Holding Talks*, relating the dramatic events to the Nigerian socio-political set up.

Keywords: Absurd, Director, Play Analysis, Practical Theatre, Ola Rotimi.

Introduction

This essay is a critique of Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. This evaluation is done as a response to the play's full theatrical implications. The study places the play on its aesthetic base from a directorial configuration. For the sake of clarity and orderliness, the analysis is done according to most of Francis Hodge's suggestions as stated in his *Play Directing: Analysis, Communication, and Style*. *Holding Talks* is a socio-political satire. Ola Rotimi uses the absurdist mode to represent social action in this play. It is a landmark in Rotimi's playwriting career due to its generic distinction.

This socio-political satire is set in a barber's shop. The dramatic action is woven around a dying barber in whose shop the events happen in this play. The setting is of social significance and is dramatically effective because in Nigeria today, barbers' shops, like palm-wine bars and other pubs are venues for alternative discourses. Debates on socio-political, economic and a variety of other phenomena of local, national, and even international importance take place in an informal atmosphere. These alternative debates occur in such venues partly because majority of

the patrons belong either to the under privileged masses who are predominantly poor or to the less educated who do not fit into the social, economic, and political elite clans. Man in this play, is one such example. The alternative debates held in these venues border on issues of great socio-political relevance to the life of the people.

Thus, *Holding Talks* is a biting satire on the attitude of successive governments in Nigeria, which have demonstrated their predilection holding talks, seminars, symposia, lectures, and other forms of organized debates bordering on our lives as individuals and as a nation without matching them with the necessary positive action to benefit the generality of the people. In this play, Man parodies our leaders by proffering numerous arguments and reasons why the dying barber must not be rushed to the hospital for emergency treatment. Rotimi supports this assertion in an interview with John Agenta (1976) when he says, “In this play, nothing really gets done. Things get close to being done, but nothing really gets done because there is always some justified rationalization for that which really needs to be done not to be done”. (33)

A close examination of government business in Nigeria since she attained political independence from Britain in 1960 is what Ola Rotimi satirizes in this play. He gives it a vivid theatrical expression by setting the events in a barber’s shop to give it a kind of immunity from official glare. Man’s parody of the socio-political set up in Nigeria assumes an absurd proportion. Rotimi uses the absurdist theatrical mode (which will be discussed below) to explore the phenomenon in the play. Hence, more meaning can be made out of this play if it is considered against the background of the theatre of the absurd although a director who looks at it simply as a socio-political satire can also achieve some results. However, looking at the play from both perspectives would be more rewarding semantically and theatrically. It is against the background of such reasoning that *Holding Talks* is analyzed below, using most of Francis Hodge’s suggestions for analyzing a play for production. These criteria are the given circumstances, dialogue, dramatic action, characters, ideas, tempos, and moods. (21-59) In addition to these, other features of the play not mentioned in the seven criteria listed above have been discussed under the sub-heading “aesthetics”

A. Given Circumstances

1. Place and Time

Holding Talks is set in a barber's shop, "the shop of a poor man". The items in the shop reflect the man's poverty. They are a rusty swivel chair, a stool, a medium sized bench mildewed with age and testily squeaky, a cheap weather-mottled wall mirror, and a spindle-legged, rickety table constructed, or rather nailed into shape from white 'afara' – an inferior stock of lumber. On this last, the following articles range themselves: a comb stuck in a balding hairbrush, two pairs of scissors, some clippers, razors, and a bottle of water. To help attract customers to the shop, poverty has also endeavoured to enlist the usefulness of a hook-up, wooden radio and a standing fan – albeit a scrawling and temperamental oddity. (*Holding Talks*)

The place is an unnamed modern city or urban area where commuters take taxicabs to move from one place to another. It is afternoon.

2. Economic Environment

Two levels of economic status are distinct in this play. The barber and his apprentice are poor the description of the barber's shop above attests to this. Many describes Apprentice as a "ragweed" and as being "lavishly attired...in...semi-demi-quaver rags, skinny of frame, ... manifesting a congenital case of acute malnutrition permanently atrophied by a daily diet alarmingly rich in protein deficiency" (22) in contradistinction, there are the rich people, represented by Man. Rotimi describes him as being "affluently attired though with a touch of the Bumpkin".

The characters are engaged in such economic pursuits as small private enterprises (as the Barber's shop depicts), journalism (as shown by the presence of pressmen and photographers), teachers, the police (representing government's presence), taxi drivers and an organized civil service with the bosses holding regular talks, symposia, conferences, seminars, discourses and so on, all of which *Holding Talks* ridicules/lampoons. There are also those who live by begging as shown by Boy Beggar and Blind Beggar as well as apprentices, those learning a trade, and so on.

3. Political Environment

Though the type of government is not stated, there is an organized political structure comprising of a civil service, law enforcement agents, the courts, and so on. It is also clearly implied in the world of the play that government functionaries hold time-consuming “Arguments, discussions, dialogues, views, symposia, conferences, meeting talks, debates – you name it” regularly. In fact, the political environment as portrayed in *Holding Talks* is suffused with satire and parody. Hence, in satirizing this syndrome depicted in the play, Man argues continuously without seeing the need to rush the Barber to the hospital for emergency treatment. He always proffers reasons, which delay or even stop the action. Man is the major instrument with which this parody or satire is realized in the play. He mimics and mocks the trend of government establishment who delays action even when such an action should be taken immediately to save certain situations either from deteriorating or getting out of hand entirely.

4. Social Environment

The world of *Holding Talks* is socially stratified. There are the rich and the poor, the masters and the apprentices, the bosses and their subordinates, the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’. This social dichotomy pervades the entirety of the play. Man is the chief spokesperson or vehicle through which this class stratification is orchestrated and manifested. He puts on an air of superiority over the rest of the characters in the play, describing them with derogatory terms. For instance, he calls the Apprentice a “ragweed”, “country bumpkin” and uncivilized. He dictates “arrogantly” to the photographer, the policewoman and, in fact, all those he encounters in the play. There is also an educational system with references to the primary school level particularly. This *ipso facto* implies that there are headmasters, teachers, and pupil in that descending order.

5. Religious Environment

In *Holding Talks* Man refers to God and Jesus Christ. This implies that the characters have the knowledge of Christianity and perhaps worship God through Jesus Christ. Man also sings Christian hymns such as “God be with you till we meet again” (21). Man also refers to the patience and the enduring qualities of Jesus Christ when he says:

Christ! Jesus equals Patience. Why, he was a hungry fellow who cooked himself rich gravy and rice one afternoon, and turned around the next minute only to find the Devil himself... The Devil himself, I tell you... in a squat... lapping up the rice and gravy in huge spoonful. In addition, all Jesus could say was 'Blessed are they that hunger!' (18).

B. Previous Action

Apprentice Barber sensitizes us that at the beginning of the play through his reading of "some tattered newspapers, stopping now and again to read out, in an unfeeling, idle drawl, the captions on some of the pages – all of which report on TALKS – all species of TALKS: national, international, continental, intercontinental – you name it". (1) These are obviously stale (old) newspapers, as the Barber's economic condition cannot let him purchase current newspapers always. Therefore, the news carried therein refers to past action.

Masters Barber is asleep prior to the arrival of Man through him the basic dramatic exposition of the issues at the play are portrayed. Clearly, Man is the director and protagonist of the dramatic action in the play. He tells us his experience during the early years of his education, describing it vividly and elaborately dramatizing his encounters with two of his teachers: Mr. Kalunde and Miss Gilford. Man provides us with a lot of information on past events through his endless pathological ranting.

C. Polar Attitude of Principal Characters

The fundamental conflict dramatized in *Holding Talks* is the satirization of the attitude of our contemporary Nigerian government. This parodistic rendition of the attitudes of the government and her agencies in Nigeria is realized through the antics of Man whose mimicry of the phenomenon reached an absurd dimension as he continues to talk endlessly without taking any meaningful action towards an emergency treatment for the dying master barber.

Apprentice barber is obviously against the argumentative positive of Man whose action makes it impossible for the dying barber to be rushed to the hospital for emergency treatment to rescue his life. At another level, Man's bourgeois stance is in contradistinction to Barber's and his

apprentice who obviously belong to the poverty-stricken class. This dichotomy between these characters is evident in their costume, apparel, or attire. Even their physical structure tells the story too. For while Man is healthy and appears well fed, the barber and his apprentice are sickly looking and on the skinny side.

Moreover, in his parody of top government functionaries, Man's attitude is dictatorial. He orders the characters in the play around as if they are all his subordinates. This is why the police woman threatened that she would arrest him, yet Man does not cooperate with her. Man's arrogance in the play puts him in a position of superiority to the other characters.

Thus, there is a defined polarization between Man's attitude and the other characters bordering on social status, point of view, and general conduct of behavioural pattern. Man exhibits an attitude of refusing to do what must be done. This kind of inaction makes one to associate this socio-political satire with what Martin Esslin: calls the theatre of the absurd. The situation is abnormal and somehow meaningless, as we shall see below.

D. Dialogue

In *Play Directing: Analysis, Communication and Style*, Francis Hodge has rooted that dialogue is the vehicle of dramatic action, the life-blood of the play (28). One level of language is identifiable in *Holding Talks*.

Essentially, the play is written in prose. It is quite discursive, flowing logically and smoothly. Man displays his erudition by posing question after question and by proffering many reasons to support his theses. For instance, Man says casually that the barber died of "argumentitis plus-plus. See what I mean? We would have been at the hospital by now if, when I said to him: Brother, your hand shakes!' He had replied: "Yes, sir, my hand shakes, sir' I then would have said: 'Are you not well?' And he: 'Yes, Sir'... (12).

At certain stages, the dialogue veers into irrelevance especially in its relatedness to what must be done to save the master Barber's life. In such instances, Man talks like a parrot. He rants like a "pathological creative" or a parrot that has taken too much pepper. Surely, Man's endless gibes are stultifying, trashy and a travesty of discourse, absurd if you like. For, the dialogue "displays the shallowness of our common discourse."

Overall, the dialogue of *Holding Talks* is quite captivating; it demonstrates and lampoons a syndrome in Nigeria, which is reflection of the play's title. The play portrays the futility of man's effort to resolve his basic executive action. This is quite absurd. For example, when apprentice Barber suggests that "may be the doctor can still... do something" to save the Barber's life, Man ridiculously laughs at this suggestion and declaims:

'Doctor', says he, 'doctor can still do something for the man.' (*Starts jog trotting about the room.*) Rescue is just around the corner. Come along folks, join the train, just drift along, full speed ahead, smooth and easy tracks at hand... if you butt into a dead-end, why, just detour, brothers, detour right or detour left, and on you go...chu-chu-chu-chu!... (17)

He goes on to review his experience at the primary school with his teachers – Mr. Kalunde and Miss Gilford, quite irrelevant and meaningless discourse with regard to this discussion.

In *Holding Talks*, Ola Rotimi uses language in a curious way to provide "not merely question and answer but attitude and relationship." (Evans xv) Here, language and discourse are regarded as instruments through which Ola Rotimi "attacks... and ridicules modern society" as Gareth Lloyd Evans notes.

E. Characters

Without questions, dramatic action characters constitute the hard core of the play script. It should be remarked here that the characters and dramatic action in *Holding Talks* are highly symbolic. They represent social units, groups, and not individuals *per se*. Even the names of the characters are symbolic – Man, Barber, Apprentice, Policewoman, Photographer, and so on. This symbolism in characterization runs through every episode of the play. This is also reflected in the dramatic action.

1) Man

From the beginning of the play to its end, Man does not change his attitude. He is always class-conscious, garrulous and believes very much in himself. He appears to be the "all-knowing" and "I'm always right" kind of character. He talks at the other characters in the play. He demonstrates his superiority to the other characters by always proffering several reasons to

support his disputations. Yet he is kind and ready to help, according to him.

Man's attitude tallies with the aesthetic leaning of *Holding Talks* – the theatre of the absurd – in which no progressive action takes place. Nothing happens due to the meaninglessness and helplessness of life or the futility of human action and existence. Hence, Man is interested in talks, discourses, and arguments throughout the play. His final statement in the play “Yes, let's talk” (42) corroborates this assertion. Thus, Man is a static and not a dynamic character.

Man is the protagonist of this drama. He demonstrates that he is quite in control of the dramatic events through his erudition. It is through him that the dramatic action unfolds.

2) Barber

Master Barber is the proprietor of the barbing saloon to which Man goes to have a haircut. He is a poor man. This is evident from the playwright's description of the Barber's shop quoted at the beginning of this analysis. Though poor, he holds firmly to his opinions. Hence, his refusal to accept Man's supposition that his handshakes makes him bet with the latter to prove it, even against the protest of his apprentice. Thus, he stakes ten pence out of the fifteen pence he has in defence of his honour or initial stance, showing that he is ready to defend his name at all cost. He says to Man “I have my own hand, and I say with my own mouth, too, that my hand does not shake, my hand has never shaken in my life, and my hand will never shake, sir.... No, sir,... but my hand is not shaking, sir and that is the St. John's Gospel Truth”. (4-) He, too, is a static character.

3) Apprentice

He is the barber-in-training. Apprentice is submissive from the beginning of the play to its end. He displays an attitude of cordiality and submissiveness throughout. Consequently, we see him welcome Man to the barber's shop at the beginning of the play even though his master was asleep. This is a demonstration that he is quite responsible. He further proves this sense of responsibility by trying all he could to ensure that the dying barber is given emergency aid but to no avail. He is quite co-operative and ready to go on virtually any errand he is sent. He also accept Man's insincere plan to invite the police to come and see Barber's dying body in sit, accepting that he (Apprentice) is deaf and dumb. He is the accomplice of Man in ridiculing the policewoman who comes for investigation.

At the beginning of the play, Apprentice ministers to the demands of Man who asks him around to regulate the old standing fan, “a scrawny and temperamental oddity.” Always ready to please the customers he urges his master not to argue further with Man.

4) Policewoman

She is the sergeant sent from the Police station to investigate the causes of the collapse and death of Barber in response to the complaint lodged by Apprentice (in collaboration with Man) with the Police. She does not appear to know exactly how to go about the assignment, which she is made to undertake. Because of this, Man manipulates her seeming ignorance to his advantage. Thus, she does not do any meaningful investigation in the course of her interaction with Man who is firmly in control of the situation. In fact, Man humiliates her because of ignorance or lack of technical expertise of her job.

F. Idea or Philosophy

In *Holding Talks*, Ola Rotimi uses the absurdist aesthetics to lampoon the Nigerian socio-political system. The theatre of the absurd is characterized by hopelessness and meaninglessness of the human condition. It is the theatre of inaction where characters merely rant on stage with minimal or no action as we can see in this play. Ola Rotimi affirms this aesthetic choice in an interview with John Agenta when he says:

I have greatly admired Harold Pinter and my one act play, *Holding Talks*, could be a tribute to Pinter’s contribution to modern drama of the absurd.... In this play, nothing really happens; things get to really being done, but nothing really gets really done. Thematically, the play treats a syndrome, predilection among people to talk about things even when those things demand urgent action as solution. (33)

Thus, in the play, Man always proffers an excuse, a reason why the dying Barber must not be rushed to the nearest hospital for emergency measures to revive him. For, existence (life) itself has no intrinsic value and words cannot adequately communicate meaningfully to rescue humankind from his predicament nor are the actions of man redemptive any longer. We are trapped in a social milieu beyond our control, according to the absurdist playwrights. Hence, the

meaningless, hopelessness and futility or the absurdity of life and the predicament of the human condition.

The title of the play is even suggestive of the content. The play unequivocally declares that our socio-political and economic elites waste valuable time on discourses instead of taking meaningful executive action to rectify that, which demands attention. Following the tradition of theatre of the absurd, Man in *Holding Talks* rants like a pathological creature instead of making haste to convey the Barber to the hospital to save his life.

Obviously, the Nigerian society is caricatured in this play. From Man's arguments or discourse without commensurate executive action, we are reminded of Jean Paris summation of the avant-garde revolution in theatrical and dramatic art that

Our logic is totally ruined, the characters themselves are no longer aware of their deeds or situations, the symbols take the place of objects, and it becomes almost impossible to determine whether the 'action' belongs to our world or to a nightmare. (45)

The dramatic action in *Holding Talks* appears to be "ruled by a sense of humour which, so to speak, destroys the destruction", according to Jean Paris. In this way, the play contributes a useful criticism of our society – our world. By lampooning our defect in Nigeria, the predilection to holding talks not matched by appropriate and desired action, Rotimi makes it obvious and urges us to find its remedy. Rotimi thus calls for a new kind of humanism in the Nigerian polity. In "The Myth of Sisyphus" Albert Camus, as Martin Esslin reiterates,

Ascribes absurdity not only to "actions and instructions" but to the human condition itself. And not because the human condition is funny, but because it is deeply tragic in an age when the loss of belief in God and human progress has eliminated the meaning of existence and has made human existence essentially purposeless and hence plainly *opposed to reason...* (671-673).

Alternatively, as Eugene Ionesco puts it in an essay on Kafka, cited by Martin Esslin in "The Absurdity of the Absurd", "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious,

metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.... (672). The foregoing quotations inform us of the philosophy dramatized in *Holding Talks*.

Since the play is devoid of progressive development of plot or psychological interest, we can safely concur with the theoreticians of the theatre of the absurd that “the dialogue is equally futile, sometimes consisting of little more than phrase-book clichés and baby talk repeated over and over again, emphasizing the nonsensical and mechanical nature of human communication by carrying it to a tragic-comic extreme”. (McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia...283) The futility and inadequacy of the dialogue has been discussed above. Eugene Ionesco’s illuminating comments on *The Bald Soprano: An Anti-play* (1948), also corresponds with the dramatic and human condition portrayed in Ola Rotimi’s *Holding Talks*. He contends that

“If it is a criticism of anything, it must be of all societies, of language, of clichés – a parody of human behaviour and therefore, a parody of the theatre too... if man is not tragic, he is ridiculous and painful, ‘comic’ in fact, and by revealing his absurdity one can achieve a sort of tragedy”. (McGraw-Hill Encyclopaedia...284)

August Boal puts it that in the theatre of the absurd “Man becomes incommunicable, not in the sense that he cannot express his innermost emotion or the nuances of his thought, but literally incommunicable to the extent that all words can be translated in one ‘chat’ (78)

G. Tempo

The tempo of *Holding Talks* is not monotonous. It rises and falls. The protagonist, Man, dictates or manipulates the tempo of the play to suit his tragic-comic antics. He varies the rhythm of the unprogressive dramatic action of the play to enable him prolong his undesirable rambling. He controls the dramatic action in this manner, subjecting all the characters virtually to his whims and caprices. He dictates the rhythm of the play. His entrance at the beginning of the play ignites the dramatic action. From his entrance to the end of the play apart from the dying Barber, Man is the only character in the play that does not leave the stage until the final blackout. He is the busiest character in this play – always arguing or proffering certain reasons

why something must not be done or defining how it must be done to avoid certain convulsions. His “apparent over-knowledge” of virtually everything and his readiness to explain such issues to the other characters in the play dictates the pace, rhythm, and tempo of the dramatic action.

There are moments when the dramatic action moves swiftly but Man tones it down to his bid to make long factual explanations to his ‘disadvantaged’ audience (the other characters in the play) over whom he claims superiority. For instance, the dramatic action rises in tempo when the barber collapses but Man deliberately tones or slows it down to explain to Apprentice what must be done, and how it must be done, thus, justifying their inaction which is characteristic of the theatre of the absurd.

It is the theatre of inaction and incongruity. This is because human action is meaningless in a hopeless world. It cannot redeem humanity from his predicament.

H. Aesthetics

In *Holding Talks*, Ola Rotimi uses the one act technique in scripting this play with just a single setting in which the dramatic action unfolds. Rotimi describes the play as an absurdist drama. The characters are few, quite unlike his other major plays like *The Gods are not to Blame*, *Kurunmi*, *Ovonranwen Nogbaisi* or *Hopes of the Living Dead* that have crowd scenes and are prodigiously peopled. The characters in this play are highly symbolic, representing units and groups.

The fundamental characteristics of the one act play, which Rotimi exploits to maximum advantage in this play, include the tightness of its structure. According to Chris Nwamuo, the dramatic action of the one act play

starts very near the climax and the play usually concerns itself with no more than five characters and no more than one particular incident which usually illuminates sharply the main character. Just as in the short story, the one-act telescopes background and situations and let us present action focus on the illuminating incident. (30-31)

Holding Talks parades the above features. Nwamuo maintains that the one-act play has, among other things, a limited scope, characters that are not developed as there is very little time

for the playwright to acquaint us with more details of characterization, a single plot, and an easily identifiable climax as well as no deep or moving conclusion. Rotimi weaves these elements into the construction of *Holding Talks*.

The number of characters is another aesthetic element used in this play. Out of all of Rotimi's published plays to date, only *Holding Talks* has this small number of characters. This is one of the peculiar features of most one-act plays and the theatre of the absurd.

Conclusion

In *Holding Talks*, Ola Rotimi has successfully lampooned the prediction of our leaders for holding talks, seminars, symposia, and conferences without embarking on meaningful or useful positive action to remedy that, which needs to be salvaged. Rotimi's criticism/parody of the Nigerian socio-political situation in this play appears timeless. For instance, how can one explain the lingering Niger Delta crisis in the country? Yet, the government has always set up committees now and then to look into the matter or held certain meetings in an attempt to find a lasting solution to this national problem.

In a subtle manner, Rotimi is saying until we correct this aberration in our socio-political life this country cannot achieve much because we seem to devote too much time to the discussion of irrelevant matters, especially when there are problems and issues that demand immediate attention or resolution. Really, such "sitting on the fence" attitude and/or delay in acting have magnified certain national problems in this country. A good example of this is the non-or-under-development of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In *Holding Talks*, therefore, Rotimi is warning Nigerians to think fast and act in the same way to prevent unnecessary delay in handling issues of immediate need and significance.

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