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DOCTORAL DEFENSE: *IBSEN ON THE WEST AFRICAN STAGE—A CASE OF A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP*

Solace Sefakor Anku, Doctoral Candidate,
Sabiha Huq, First Opponent and
Awo Mana Asiedu, Second Opponent

At the brink of the collapse of colonial rule, literary and theatrical endeavors in sub-Saharan African colonies were most often political. The plays of Henrik Ibsen found their way into many British colonies because their subjects were relevant to local theatre and literary enthusiasts. Additionally, changes in Ibsen's literary reception in these colonies suggest a development in the attitudes of colonial subjects. In southeastern Asia, particularly India, there is a thriving Ibsen performance tradition on its post-colonial theatre stages. In sub-Saharan Africa, the southern region has shown a sustained interest in Ibsen's works, while very little can be said about the western region. This dissertation sets out to explain the low interest in Ibsen's works on the theatre stages of western Africa by drawing on some markers from Ghana and Nigeria. The study finds its premise on the mapped travels of the play *A Doll's House* on the IbsenStage database to piece together historical and political patterns of the reception of Ibsen in Ghana. In a broader context of female imaging in western African literary traditions, the study situates an argument of reception linked to the traditions of performing and imaging maternity and women. This dissertation finds that colonial censorship rules, nationalist sentiments of the early post-colonial period, governmental policies on culture, and some traditions of

female imaging in western African literature are liable for the state of Ibsen reception in this region.

FIRST OPPONENT: SABIHA HUQ, PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, KHULNA UNIVERSITY, BANGLADESH

1. Question

You have mentioned in your thesis: "since Ibsen plays are regular reading materials in Ghanaian universities, productions of these plays would be fairly common" (Anku 2019, 1). Do you know exactly when Ibsen entered the universities in Ghana? Which Ibsen texts do Ghanaian universities teach at present?

1. Answer

One cannot categorically state the specific timeframe that the first Ibsen text arrived in colonial Ghana—The Gold Coast—neither can we place a definite record on the introduction of this playwright's works into the universities' curricula. However, we can make a deduction from events that happened in specific epochs in this country's political and socio-cultural phases to trace and make a hypothetical allocation of time. A censorship row in 1934 situates an Ibsen play within the literary society activities of the Gold Coast. This is the earliest documentation of an Ibsen play in the colony that I have identified. However, availability of Ibsen plays in private libraries would be plausible during this period. The title of the Ibsen play caught in the censorship dispute was, however, not mentioned. In the post-colonial period, Ibsen's dramaturgical influences were present in the playwright Joe de Graft's works. *An Enemy of the People* was in circulation and use in both Ghana and Nigeria during the late 1950s and the 1960s. A revision of the theatre studies curricula at the University of Ghana, School of Performing Arts, saw the introduction of *An Enemy of the People* and *A Doll's House*. In sum, these texts are the most taught and available in Ghana.

2. Question

Referring to your claim:

> The above discussion on the reception of Ibsen's plays in the Gold Coast shows two distinct forms of reception of Ibsen as a playwright and his works. First, there appeared to be a heighten(ed) interest in the works of Ibsen because they encourage philosophical debates which could incite social agitations against the colonial authority. If we are to consider the reception of the plays in this way, then, Ibsen's representation of social subjects in his works encouraged his reception in the Gold Coast. Second, Ibsen's plays were received critically by the colonial authority who were quick to read significant political meanings to the way Ibsen was received – i.e., particularly by the literary societies that had well-educated and influential locals. In effect, Ibsen's texts were banned in the colony. The overall conclusion we could arrive at pertaining to the discussion I have presented in this section is that, to both players in this colony, i.e., the locals and the colonists, Ibsen's plays were of interest in two main ways; they acted as a provocateur and a threat. (Anku 2019, 28)

How would you respond to the claim that an absence of translations may be the reason behind Ibsen's absence in theatres? Aime Cesaire's adaptation of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare is a famous example. This could have happened in Ibsen's case. A possible reason for Ibsen's absence in the theatres could have been the scarcity of English/French translations of his texts, which is a factor you did not consider.

2. Answer

In response to this question, I shall attempt to explore the topic of translation in two ways. My understanding of this term in the context of my study and our discussion is indicative of two terminologies in reception and cultural studies of literary texts; and these are translation—from a source text's language to another—and adaptation or appropriation—the acculturation of a text or narrative in a new cultural context for easy assimilation, reception, and appreciation.

The issue of translation in colonial Ghana is a tricky one if we must investigate it from the binary perspective of this term. I have mentioned in my dissertation that there were two plausible modes of importation of Ibsen's texts into the Gold Coast. These

were through the British expatriates stationed in the various administrative posts in this territory and through returnee local students from Britain. Self-help strategies to refine and build on education inspired an interest in literature for the locals. On the other hand, the elite class of locals had a political and discourse-oriented interest in literary texts since the elite reading and drama clubs were offshoots of political student groups.

During this period the reception of literature was not primarily focused on translations and adaptations. Moreover, literature in English was an aspect of language/cultural learning and this was a primary aim of the colonial administration. However, some attempts at textual appropriation did occur. Mabel Dove, a member of the Accra Dramatic Society in the 1930s, adapted Bernard Shaw's work, *The Black Girl in Search of God*, and called it *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of Shaw*. Times of West Africa published this adaptation as a serial in 1934. Mable Dove wrote under the pseudonym Marjorie Mensah to avoid detection. This adaptation was a critique of the colonial administration in general but also the censorship of Shaw (which happened at the same time as Ibsen) and the desire for independent choice of literary texts. Dove's adaptation was not aimed at the cultural accessibility of Shaw's text, *per se*, which indicates that cultural relevance might not have been the objective of this writer, but rather an expression of dissatisfaction—protest.

The stormy wind of anti-colonialism, dissatisfaction, and the political urgencies of the 1930 to the mid-1950s inspired a shift in the reception of literature other than those produced in the Empire. The fundamental attraction was to the ideas being expressed in those texts and how these thoughts could help in their criticism of the colonial administration. Literary appreciation was, therefore, caught within the search for a subject of their own which is quite different from the storms of nationalism and cultural revivalism of the post-colonial era. Since Ibsen was under the censorship radar of the authorities, an adapted version of any of his text would come under control. To conclude, I am of the opinion that an adaptation of an Ibsen text

would have had some degree of impact, but cultural relevancy of foreign literary texts was not of primary interest to the colonial subjects.

3. Question

In your thesis you mentioned:

> Also, by mapping the travels of these funds and their sources, a connection can be traced that links Norwegian diplomatic interests to the places where these funds are directed. To explain this observation in detail, the map below shows the flow of funding from Norwegian institutions to some developing world's theatres stages for the productions of *A Doll's House*. (Anku 2019, 4)

At first sight, it leaves us with the assumption that since production capital is readily available, theatre directors or producers might, based on this availability, choose this play among many others. If considered from this perspective, a degree of the interest shown in the production of this play, especially in the developing/post-colonial regions, may not be entirely innocent.

Returning to the map on funding once again, we would agree that there are undertones of Norwegian soft diplomacy linked to the promotion of the production and use of this text in the global south. This aside, the greater picture in terms of the reception of Ibsen in western Africa, appears to be linked to the lack of diplomatic relations as well as interests that (previously) exist between the region and Norway. My questions to you are: Why did you not pursue further research on Norwegian funding? Are there important reasons that hindered the research, or did you not find it worthwhile?

3. Answer

My primary focus was on the political and cultural borders that, over the various epochs of this region's political history, have shaped the production of literature and the reception of it. Therefore, this connection between funding and the production of Ibsen's plays on post-colonial stages would have been an

exciting detour from my plans. I would say that a digression into Norwegian bilateral relationships, be it economic and cultural on the African continent, would make a stimulating dissertation on its own. Since you have brought up this issue, I can briefly share some findings regarding the connection between Norwegian diplomacy/soft power in Ibsen reception in the southern African region.

Sothern Africa's reception of Ibsen could be analyzed in two ways—mission/emigration and political/diplomatic relationships. Norwegian influences in South Africa began as early as 1890 through the Norwegian Lutheran mission activities and emigration. By the 1900s Norwegian impacts were visible in Durban in the forms of a Norwegian school, church, and newspaper. Some Norwegian settlers moved inland to form enclaves in Mozambique, Angola, and Rhodesia. In 1929, *A Doll's House* was performed in Afrikaans and later it was taken on a performance tour of the Afrikaans speaking regions of southern Africa—namely Namibia, Rhodesia, and Botswana. It is indicative that this early performance was targeted at the white and European population.

Norway's involvement in educating and providing opportunities for brilliant black students was, in a way, an act of resistance towards the apartheid regime. By the 1960s diplomatic relations grew between Norway and South Africa, with the former offering financial and aid support to the South African liberation movements and victims of apartheid. The support came in different modes, and one was through educational resources. Scholarships and exchange programs were initiated by the Norwegian government between Norway and black South Africa student bodies. Cultural and literary interactions emerged through these exchanges. During this period, the Stellenbosch University Debating Society performed about three Ibsen plays. Decades later, there have been over 30 professional productions of Ibsen's plays in South African theatres, this figure excludes student experimental performances of Ibsen's works.

The new trend of reception of Ibsen in this region furthers Norway bilateral relations once again. The Ibsen Award which comes with considerable financial support was awarded to CHIPAWO to support the mentorship of small groups of actors from South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. While Norwegian diplomatic presence in Ghana is particularly visible in the oil sector, it has shown little interest in the cultural sector.

SECOND OPPONENT: AWO MANA ASIEDU, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, THE SCHOOL OF PERFORMING ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF GHANA, GHANA

1. Question

In Chapter two of your dissertation, you look at the West African context with a historical analysis from precolonial to postcolonial times. Particularly fascinating is your account of the post-independent cultural activism where writers and nationalists asserted their African cultural perspectives and rejected the hegemony of European cultural impositions. Could you elaborate a bit on this with a focus on what you call an "ideological clash" between Efua Sutherland and Joe de Graft?

1. Answer

Unlike today, the theatre environment in Ghana was vibrant during the first decade of independence. We could attribute this vibrancy to the government's use of the arts industry as a vital institution for its spread of information, nationalism, and to some extent, a strategy for the spread of the president's ideological indoctrination. The Ghana National Theatre Movement was an integral hub central to the nation's cultural renaissance. The mandate of this group attracted several literary personalities within Africa and the diaspora. Efua Sutherland and Joe de Graft were the two charismatic leaders of this movement. Although they were both in leadership positions in the movement, they differed in their anti-colonialist and dramaturgic ideologies.

These differences in ideological leanings soon manifested in two ideological cults, each loyal to one of the leaders.

I have a working relationship with the Sutherland archives and estates. I was, thus, honored to have access to some of her notes and teaching materials. Sutherland was passionate about Pan-Africanism, and traditional performance forms. Her primary aim was to promote these intricate traditional storytelling and performance forms. Extensions of her interests in traditional oral and performative arts forms could be identified in the architectural designs in the various theatre spaces that were under her supervision. Two edifices that embody her vision are Accra Drama Studio (now called the Efua Sutherland's Drama Studio) and her rural experimental theatre space called Kodzidan near Cape Coast. These two theatre spaces, besides the physical representations of traditional symbols of folk performative designs, also contribute to the nationalist and anti-colonial agenda—cultural autonomy of an independent state. While Sutherland had a pan-Africanist scheme, she often references the president, Kwame Nkrumah's desires—"Ghana must use its own legends to heal itself."

While Sutherland was ideologically aligned with the pan-Africanist and anti-colonialist ideologies, Joe de Graft showed more of a neutral ideological leaning. De Graft acquired his surname from his Dutch grandfather. He began as an English teacher at Mfantsipim Secondary School where he was also the director of the school's drama laboratory. He is noted for his experiments with Shakespeare's plays and his fascination with proscenium staging styles. During his work with the theatre movement, he wrote and staged a play called *Sons and Daughters*. This play mimicked the plot styles of Ibsen and other modern European dramatists. Critics suggest this play was his attempt to perfect writing for the proscenium stage. James Gibbs, a theatre historian who has worked extensively on the Ghanaian theatre, has a different perception, which is de Grafts receptiveness to the legacies of the nation's colonial past. Joe de Graft's art tends to mimic European playwrighting and staging styles such that readings of cultural hybridity are plausible.

Within the theatre movement, his work and ideological inclinations received harsh criticism. Among the many labels, he was called a "neo-colonialist," subtle references to his Dutch heritage were also made.

To conclude, Sutherland and de Graft were individuals and theatre practitioners of different reputations. Their respective ideological stances were of varying significance to the theatre movement as well as the development of an independent Ghanaian theatre. Whereas many performers, playwrights, and academics linked to this theatre movement identified with the president's grand philosophies on independence and cultural autonomy to the extent that instances of denial of the country's colonial past trickles into their ideas, de Graft appears to indulge in the acceptance of his colonial past and the alterations it had on the socio-cultural realities of the independent state. Inasmuch as the conflicts of ideologies where birthed from differences of ideas, the relationship between Nkrumah, Sutherland, and the larger pan-Africanist movement, is indicative of the politicized nature of the perpetuation of the African centered performance thoughts. Therefore, it is safe to say that Joe de Graft was ideologically misplaced in the grandeur of Ghana's cultural and theatre movement.

2. Question

I found the above mapping of the global travel of the play, *A Doll's House*, fascinating. What do you think makes this play so easily translatable across cultures and languages? Is this Ibsen's most traveled play? If so, why do you think that is? Why is it so much more produced in Western Europe than anywhere else on the globe?

2. Answer

A Doll's House is the most critically received of all Ibsen's plays. Before the debut of this play, Ibsen was not known outside the Scandinavian theatre scene. The global success of Ibsen is, therefore, linked to this text. The play has been translated into most languages and adapted into films. The text's accessibility in

various languages and in film has further encouraged its reception. Additionally, its availability has also inspired rewritings and adaptations of it into various socio-cultural contexts.

While the play has made gainful impacts in other places other than the European continent, social and cultural evolutions have sustained its performance. First, we find that the protagonist, Nora, rebels against societal expectations of the middle-class woman, wife, and mother. Setting this subject against the realities of 19th century European women in general, it is indicative that the narrative address societal expectations of women and attempts to offer a critique of the status of women. Second, the 1960s opened a new chapter in the play's reception. The feminist movement had gained momentum again, and so did the thematic relevance of the play. Kate Millet's reading of *A Doll's House* in her book *Sexual Politics* interprets Nora as an emblem of the revolution. However, at the turn of the century, theatre directors have interpreted this narrative differently. The feminist interpretations are slightly dampened while other equally pertinent subjects are highlighted. Let us take, for example, Thomas Ostermeier's 2002 production where the Helmer nursemaid is a colored and an immigrant woman (an au pair). Also, the Helmers were rich to the extent that the "money issue" which is critical to the development of the plot of the original play was near invisible. Several other changes could be teased out, however, the director's recognition of the immigrant population and the ethnic niches forms in this social group takes audiences into the social context of 21st century Germany. Applied to these brief explanations, the adaptability of the narrative's subjects into new social realities is another catalyst to its popularity.

3. Question

Would you agree that Tracie Utoh Ezeajugh's Nigerian adaptation of *A Doll's House* is not exalting motherhood *per se*, and may be critiquing the ways in which African women could be trapped by this expectation of motherhood? Could you explain this?

3. Answer

I am of the view that there are several ways to answer this question. From a radical feminist's point of view, the exaltation of maternity in the adaptation is problematic. However, from an African feminist perspective the narrative's presentation of maternity could be read as an exaltation of motherhood. When considered from the western African literary standpoint, it also illustrates devotion to the dominant patterns of imagining this trope in the literary traditions of this region. Furthermore, within the context of performing motherhood in Igbo culture and within the boundaries of many western African societies, the narrative affirms motherhood.

As I have pointed out, contexts are integral to the assessment of the maternal motif in this adaptation. In the original narrative, Nora disassociates herself from her position as a wife and mother. In the social context of the play at the time it was written and produced on stage, the protagonist's resolution was abominable. Even within the theatre traditions and genres at that time, the playwright presented a complicated image of womanhood. The German theatres' rejection of the play's original ending indicates it nonconformity to the expectations of female imaging on the theatre stages. This goes to show the extent to which realities, context-specific expectations of staging gender, and a playwright's opinion intersect. This intersection is noticeable in Utoh-Ezeajugh rewriting strategies employed in this adaptation.

First, the adaptation's title, *Nneora: An African Doll's House,* situates the text in a specific setting suggesting to the audiences, at first glance, a departure from the normative motifs expressed in the original narrative. The connotation of the labeling the dollhouse as an African dollhouse gives the audiences a specific image. In various western African societies, traditional dolls, often wooden and made of specific designs, have gender specific uses and implications. Many of the dolls made for girls and women in these locations are associated with fertility. They also have spiritual and ritual overtones as they are connected to deities believed to give children or make women fertile. Besides the nuanced markings of fertility expressed by the invocation of the

"African doll" the concept of "housing the doll" (an African doll's house) buttresses the notion of fertility and maternity yet again. Women that own these doll's strap them around their groin area, which signifies its correlation to the womb. Therefore, the adaptation makes a strong statement for motherhood in its formulation of the title. Although comprehensions such as this could go unidentified by an audience who is oblivious to this cultural statement, events in the narrative also support this stance. Mama Uduak and Linda, the two supporting female characters perform their cultural expectations of motherhood through their expressions of nurturing, and agency. Linda leaves her abusive marriage with her children, yet she educates and develops herself. While Mama Uduak relinquishes her position as a wife to take on her status of motherhood which gives her ample agency over her husband and household. Nneora, on the other hand, struggles to negotiate her position as a mother. Unlike the other female characters mentioned, Nneora's inability to use the cultural agency associated with motherhood is exacerbated by her failure to produce a male child. Besides the conflict initiated by Nneora's past and the imminent blackmail, the issue of the male child, although subtle, critiques the cultural expectations of female maternity and the agency of motherhood.

The rewriting process does not simply illustrate cultural appropriative approaches. In most of the developing world, the play *A Doll's House* has gained recognition for its contribution to the campaign for women's rights and equality. Whereas the narrative depicts various aspects of the realities faced by women in the period in which it was set, there is a noticeable universality to these experiences. In this way, manipulations of the story do not entirely depart from the significant message that the ending conveys. Studies of various adaptations of this play suggest many rewritings have remained somewhat faithful to the original where Nora slams the door on her husband and children, or she is left contemplating her departure. On third world stages, Nora tends to leave with her children. Holledge et al. suggest acts like this confront child custody laws or affirm the social statuses of women. In Utoh-Ezeajugh's

adaptation, Nneora exits with her children which could be read as an affirmation of her status as a mother, a position she was previously unable to negotiate. However, if read within the context of African feminism(s) a concrete image of maternal exaltation emerges both in the cultural and political sense.

As explained, it is safe to say that the adaptation appropriates maternity as a departure from the original narrative. In doing so, the maternal trope illustrates cultural and social realities of women in the location and period in which it is set. Furthermore, it situates maternity into emerging theorizations of African women's identities, social spaces, agencies, and recognition. I am, therefore, of the view that while the adaptation depicts various aspects of gendered realities and social statuses, one of its dominant features is its exaltation of motherhood.

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