

# Interrogating History Through Drama: A New Historicist Reading Of African Drama

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the intricate relationship between history and literature in African drama, emphasizing how dramatic texts serve as sites for negotiating historical memory and social consciousness. Using the New Historicist theoretical framework, the study examines African plays as both products and critiques of their socio-political contexts, demonstrating how they reflect, contest, and reinterpret historical narratives. Employing a critical and textual reading approach, the paper analyzes selected African dramas to uncover the interplay between historical events, cultural practices, and literary expression. The central argument posits that African drama not only mirrors the historical realities of colonization, postcolonial governance, and socio-cultural struggles but also actively participates in shaping public understanding of these histories. Findings indicate that dramatists utilize narrative strategies, characterization, and symbolism to challenge hegemonic historical discourses, assert indigenous perspectives, and foreground marginalized voices. The analysis further reveals that African drama functions as a dynamic archive of collective memory, offering both historical insight and socio-political critique. The study recommends that scholars, educators, and policymakers integrate African dramatic texts into historical and cultural curricula to enhance awareness of the continent's complex past and to foster critical engagement with its contemporary social realities. By reading African drama through a New Historicist lens, this paper underscores the potential of literature to interrogate history, facilitate epistemic justice, and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Africa's historical and cultural landscape.*

**Keywords:** New Historicism, African Drama, History, Culture, Language

## Introduction

Historicism highlights the idea that literary works are closely connected to the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which they are created. As Belsey (2018) points out, texts are not just isolated pieces of art; they actively participate in their time, reflecting and influencing societal values. New Historicism builds on this by proposing that literature and history are in constant dialogue, with texts engaging in discussions about power, ideology, and social structures (Greenblatt, 2017). Gallagher (2020) emphasizes that instead of merely reflecting the past, literary works act as spaces where historical conversations are negotiated, challenged, or reaffirmed, showcasing the mutual relationship between history and creative expression.

African drama, which is deeply rooted in rich oral traditions and communal storytelling, serves as a prime example of this dynamic interaction. Ohaeto (2020) notes that these plays not only preserve cultural memory but also examine contemporary social issues, providing both enjoyment and critical insight. Okafor (2019) points out that African playwrights often incorporate historical events, symbols, and performance techniques to delve into the complexities of colonial legacies, identity, and social justice. Neloua (2022) further illustrates that through drama, marginalized voices are able to express themselves, offering alternative narratives to the dominant historical accounts.

This paper posits that an analysis of African drama through a New Historicist perspective elucidates the active engagement of playwrights with history, transcending mere documentation of events to scrutinise power dynamics and societal conventions. Nketia (2021) asserts that drama serves as both a reflection and a catalyst, enabling communities to contemplate the past while influencing modern interpretations. Through the examination of selected plays, this study investigates the methods by which dramatists utilise narrative techniques and performance practices to contest dominant historical narratives and promote critical awareness, thereby illustrating that African drama functions as both a medium of artistic expression and a platform for historical exploration.

## Conceptual Clarifications

### New Historicism

New Historicism is a critical approach that sees literature as intricately linked to its historical and cultural backdrop, highlighting the relationship between texts and the power dynamics of their era. Instead of viewing literature as a standalone artistic creation, New Historicism examines how texts both shape and are shaped by the social, political, and ideological forces at play (Greenblatt, 2017). This perspective challenges conventional historical criticism by acknowledging that history is constructed through discourse, with literature serving as a tool to explore these constructions. This approach is especially valuable for analyzing African drama, as plays often engage with historical events, colonial legacies, and societal changes.

Moreover, New Historicism emphasizes that texts can both reflect and challenge dominant ideologies. As Gallagher (2020) points out, literary works are not mere reflections of society; they actively contribute to shaping historical awareness by bringing attention to marginalized voices and alternative stories. In the African context, New Historicism enables scholars to explore the connections between traditional oral traditions, colonial experiences, and postcolonial realities, illustrating how playwrights navigate intricate

socio-political landscapes to provoke thoughtful engagement from audiences (Ohaeto, 2020). By concentrating on the cultural and political influences surrounding literary creation, New Historicism offers a rich framework for understanding the historical importance and lasting impact of African drama.

### **Historicism**

Historicism is the exploration of history and its impact on human thought, culture, and literary expression. It highlights that texts and ideas are shaped by their historical context and cannot be fully appreciated without considering the era in which they were created (Belsey, 2018). In this view, history is more than just a timeline of events; it includes the social, political, economic, and cultural forces that influence human experiences and collective memory (Nketia, 2021). Historicism posits that grasping these contexts is crucial for interpreting literature, as texts often engage with the realities, struggles, and values of their time.

Also, historicism acknowledges the interconnectedness of literature and history. As Neloua (2022) notes, literature can both mirror historical circumstances and shape how societies perceive their past. This interplay is particularly evident in African drama, where plays confront issues like colonial oppression, nationalist movements, and current social challenges. By placing texts within their historical frameworks, scholars can reveal the deeper meanings woven into narrative, dialogue, and performance, showcasing how drama acts as both a record and a critique of historical events (Okafor, 2019).

### **African Drama**

African drama includes both written works and performances that come from Africa. It is based on oral traditions, folklore, and group storytelling (Obafemi, 1996). It is a way for societies to think about, keep, and give new meaning to their cultural values, social norms, and stories from the past (Ohaeto, 2020). African drama tends to focus on group identity, moral lessons, and getting the audience involved, mixing entertainment with social criticism. This is different from Western theatre, which often focuses on individual characters or plot-driven stories.

This type of drama serves as both an artistic expression and a historical documentation. Numerous plays tackle profound themes including colonialism, postcolonial governance, gender dynamics, and social justice, offering perspectives on the political and cultural dilemmas of their era (Okafor, 2019). Scholars such as Neloua (2022) contend that African drama constitutes a dynamic realm where tradition and modernity converge, facilitating contemplation of the past while fostering the imagination of novel social possibilities. The performative aspects, such as language, music, and ritual, augment its function as a vibrant repository of African cultural memory and collective identity (Achebe, 1975).

### **Culture**

Culture includes the values, beliefs, practices, norms, and artistic expressions that are unique to a certain group or society. It influences individuals' perceptions of the world, their interactions with one another, and the transmission of knowledge across generations (Nketia, 2021). In literary studies, culture serves as a lens for text analysis, elucidating the impact of social values, power dynamics, and historical contexts on artistic expression. In African drama, culture shapes not only the content of the plays but also their forms, performance styles, and audience engagement, mirroring collective modes of comprehension and interpretation of the world (Ohaeto, 2020).

Culture is also not fixed; it changes over time in response to changes in history, society, and politics. Gallagher (2020) says that it is both a product and a place for negotiation, showing the tensions between tradition and change, indigenous knowledge and outside influences, and local and global points of view. African playwrights frequently integrate cultural symbols, proverbs, rituals, and communal practices into their narratives, creating stories that resonate with audiences while simultaneously honouring and interrogating their cultural heritage. This relationship between culture and drama shows how deeply connected art is to the lives of people in communities.

### **Language**

Language serves as a vital means of communication, conveying meaning, expressing identity, and facilitating cultural knowledge. It's not just a tool for daily interactions; it also acts as a medium through which literature expresses ideas, emotions, and social critiques (Belsey, 2018). In the realm of African drama, language holds special importance: playwrights frequently use indigenous languages, dialects, and multilingual approaches to reflect social realities, preserve oral traditions, and connect with diverse audiences (Okafor, 2019). Thus, language operates as both a communicative and cultural tool, influencing how stories are narrated and interpreted.

More importantly, in African drama, language often carries symbolic weight, revealing deeper historical and cultural meanings. As noted by Neloua (2022), proverbs, idioms, and performative speech acts play a crucial role in the drama's capacity to convey moral, political, and historical insights. By paying close attention to language, scholars can uncover the subtle dynamics of power, resistance, and identity woven into the texts, making it an essential aspect of literary analysis (Okpewho, 1992). Therefore, language is not just a means of conversation; it is a fundamental component that links drama to the lived experiences and collective memories of African communities.

## Theoretical Framework

### New Historicism

This study uses New Historicism as its theoretical framework to explore African drama, viewing it as both a product of and a response to historical, social, and political influences. Emerging in the 1980s, New Historicism offers a critical lens that highlights how literature cannot be separated from the historical contexts in which it is created and interpreted (Greenblatt, 2017). Unlike traditional historicist methods that see history as objective and literature as merely reflecting it, New Historicism posits that both literary texts and historical narratives are constructed, interpretative, and intertwined with power dynamics (Gallagher, 2020). This approach enables scholars to examine how African dramatic works interact with colonial and postcolonial histories, social hierarchies, and cultural identities, showcasing the complex relationship between literature and the wider socio-political environment.

Stephen Greenblatt, a key figure in New Historicism, views literature as a space where history, ideology, and human experience intersect (Greenblatt, 2017). His approach is built on several key ideas: first, that texts and their historical contexts are fundamentally linked; literature is created in response to and in conversation with the cultural, political, and social conditions of its era. Second, history is not a straightforward account but a narrative shaped by discourse and influenced by those in power (Belsey, 2018). Third, power dynamics affect both the creation of literary works and the formation of historical knowledge, often favoring dominant narratives while sidelining alternative perspectives. By applying these ideas to African drama, we can critically analyze plays as significant contributions to historical narratives, where playwrights may challenge colonial portrayals, critique current governance, or safeguard indigenous knowledge (Ohaeto, 2020).

In this study, New Historicism serves as a valuable framework for examining African drama as a medium that both mirrors and challenges historical realities. Works like Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War* and Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* illustrate how playwrights navigate the legacies of colonialism, social hierarchies, and cultural memory. This aligns with Greenblatt's perspective that literature cannot be separated from the power dynamics of its historical context (Neloua, 2022; Okafor, 2019). By placing these plays within their specific historical and socio-cultural settings, this approach allows for a richer understanding of how African drama acts as a platform for historical dialogue, shedding light on themes of national identity, collective memory, and the interplay between tradition and modernity. Ultimately, New Historicism not only clarifies the historical aspects of African drama but also supports the main goal of this study: exploring history through literary expression.

### Literature Review

New Historicism has changed how scholars examine literature and history, highlighting that texts are not just isolated objects but active players in shaping historical understanding. As Greenblatt (2017) points out, literature and its historical context are intertwined, meaning that to grasp one, you must engage with the other. Modern scholars emphasize its importance in postcolonial studies, where literary works challenge dominant historical narratives and reveal power dynamics (Kellner, 2021). By viewing texts as embedded in cultural and political contexts, New Historicism emphasizes how ideology, social structures, and historical circumstances affect the creation and interpretation of literary works (Belsey, 2018). This viewpoint enables a more profound exploration of how narratives reflect and shape their historical contexts.

African drama, in particular, serves as a powerful medium for expressing and preserving historical consciousness. Research by Ohaeto (2020) and Neloua (2022) shows that African playwrights weave social memory, political struggles, and cultural practices into their works, providing alternative narratives to dominant histories. The exploration of colonialism, nationalism, and postcolonial governance in African plays not only entertains but also educates and critiques, offering audiences a new perspective on historical events (Okafor, 2019). Playwrights like Femi Osofisan exemplify this method, using the stage to examine the relationship between indigenous traditions and colonial ideologies, creating works that are both artistic and historical records.

Language and culture play a vital role in African drama, influencing how power and meaning are negotiated. Language goes beyond just being a means of communication; it carries ideology, shapes identity, and mirrors social hierarchies (Bamgbose, 2021). Playwrights use indigenous idioms, proverbs, and even colonial languages to make deliberate linguistic choices that critique oppression, assert cultural independence, and engage audiences in thoughtful ways. Culture, on the other hand, serves as both content and context, helping audiences grasp historical events and societal values. The interplay of language, culture, and dramatic narrative makes African drama a rich field for exploring power dynamics, memory, and identity formation.

This study builds on existing research by connecting New Historicist theory to African drama in a comprehensive manner that highlights the intertwining of text, history, and socio-political influences. While previous studies often focus on individual plays or playwrights, this paper examines how African drama, as a collective historical tool, generates and challenges historical knowledge within its socio-cultural context. In doing so, it adds to the intellectual conversation surrounding literature, culture, and history, showing that African dramatists are not just storytellers but active contributors to shaping collective memory and questioning dominant narratives. This perspective positions African drama as an essential area for both literary and historical exploration.

### Textual Analysis / Discussion

History as a reconstruction in African drama is crucial for understanding how playwrights reinterpret past events for modern audiences. African dramatists frequently challenge official or colonial historical narratives, presenting history as a battleground rather than a static record. For instance, Wole Soyinka, in works like *A Dance of the Forests*, reconstructs Nigeria's post-

independence history by blending myth, ritual, and political critique to highlight the shortcomings of nationalist leadership while reclaiming indigenous historical awareness (Soyinka, 2019). Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* revisits the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, depicting historical figures not just as symbols but as complex individuals whose struggles mirror broader social and political conflicts (Ngũgĩ, 2018). Through these reconstructions, African drama actively participates in shaping historical understanding, supporting Greenblatt's (2017) claim that literature and history are intertwined and mutually influential.

Power and ideology are deeply embedded in African dramatic representation, revealing how authority, resistance, and social hierarchies function within historical and cultural frameworks. Soyinka's plays often critique power structures, exposing corruption, authoritarianism, and moral decline, while also celebrating individual agency and collective responsibility (Jeyifo, 2004). Ngũgĩ, writing in a postcolonial Kenyan context, examines the lasting impacts of colonial ideology on governance and society, illustrating how imposed power influences both historical narratives and contemporary awareness (Onyebadi, 2020). New Historicism enables us to read these plays as ideological texts, where characters, dialogue, and plot reflect ongoing negotiations between dominant and marginalized forces, and where historical memory is contested through dramatic performance.

Language and cultural identity are deeply connected in African drama, acting as both a medium and a message. Soyinka often weaves Yoruba idioms, proverbs, and ritualistic speech into English, creating a rich linguistic texture that reflects cultural nuances while also addressing universal themes (Eze, 2019). Ngũgĩ's choice to write in Gikuyu and later in English is a political statement, challenging the dominance of colonial languages and affirming indigenous identity (Wa Thiong'o, 2018). In both instances, language serves as a means to navigate identity, share cultural memory, and resist dominant narratives, showcasing how playwrights embed power dynamics and cultural insights within the language of their works.

Colonial and postcolonial narratives in African drama often reveal the contradictions and violence of European colonization, while also examining the difficulties of postcolonial governance. Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* contrasts traditional village life with modern colonial influences, critiquing the imposition of foreign values and the resulting social tensions (Soyinka, 1963). Similarly, Ngũgĩ's historical dramas portray the trauma of colonization, but they also highlight resilience and the reclamation of indigenous agency through cultural revival and political activism (Ngũgĩ, 2018). Additionally, orality and cultural memory in African theatre serve as tools for preserving collective identity. Storytelling, songs, chants, and communal performances in both Soyinka's and Ngũgĩ's plays embed a sense of historical awareness within the audience's experience, ensuring that history is not just recorded but felt, remembered, and questioned (Achebe, 1988). Through these methods, African drama acts as a living archive, resonating with New Historicist ideas that history is constructed, mediated, and intertwined with the cultural texts that represent it.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study highlights how African drama acts as a vibrant medium for reconstructing, questioning, and reinterpreting history. By exploring the works of Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, it becomes clear that these playwrights do more than just tell historical stories; they critically engage with the connections between power, culture, language, and ideology to challenge prevailing narratives and promote indigenous viewpoints. African drama serves as both a cultural repository and a means of social critique, showcasing the intricacies of historical experiences and the lasting effects of colonial and postcolonial influences on societal frameworks.

Utilizing New Historicism has been particularly insightful for understanding African drama, as it emphasizes the close relationship between text and historical context. This perspective reveals that African plays are not standalone artistic works but are intricately linked to the social, political, and cultural landscapes of their eras. Elements like language, orality, and performance techniques play vital roles in preserving cultural memory and resisting the loss of indigenous histories. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that a New Historicist approach enhances our understanding of African drama by illustrating how playwrights actively reshape history, navigate power dynamics, and assert cultural identity, providing audiences with both enjoyment and critical insights into the historical and ideological forces that shape African societies.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the insights derived from this study, several recommendations emerge to strengthen both the study and practice of African drama.

Firstly, to enhance the study and practice of African drama, it's important to encourage more interdisciplinary approaches, especially those that merge literature with history. Universities and research institutions could create joint courses, seminars, or research initiatives that look at African drama from historical viewpoints, offering a space for students and scholars to delve into the connections between text, context, and culture. Funding for research and academic grants should focus on projects that utilize historical frameworks in analyzing dramatic texts, promoting innovative insights that connect literary criticism with historical exploration.

Secondly, there should be a stronger emphasis on indigenous languages in drama. Theatre professionals, drama educators, and publishers can play a vital role in promoting productions and publications in local languages, ensuring that performances and texts genuinely represent cultural identity. Academic programs could incorporate modules that investigate the linguistic subtleties in African drama, while journals and conferences could showcase research that examines how language influences both meaning and audience perception.

Thirdly, encouraging the use of New Historicist readings is essential. Scholars can utilize Stephen Greenblatt's principles to analyze African texts, especially in understanding how power, ideology, and historical context shape dramatic representation. Organizing workshops, conferences, and special journal editions can create opportunities for these readings, fostering a community of researchers dedicated to exploring the connection between text and history.

Finally, it is crucial to include marginalized cultural voices in literary analysis. Researchers should focus on gathering oral histories, documenting lesser-known plays, and producing community-based theatre that showcases diverse experiences. By integrating these texts into academic curricula, we can highlight perspectives that are frequently ignored. Such efforts will help ensure that African drama remains a dynamic space for cultural memory, identity, and historical reflection.

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