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John Munonye's *A Dancer of Fortune* and Wole Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy*: A Comparative Flipside Criticism

Chinedu Nwadike

Academic Researcher,
English & Literary Studies Department
University of Nigeria, Nsukka;
Dean of Students Affairs
Holy Ghost Academy, Amaokpala

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Abstract:

John Munonye's *A Dancer of Fortune* and Wole Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy* deserve flipside criticism. Flipside criticism has emerged to fill a gap where no literary theory singularly focuses on depictions of flipside characters (people who find themselves pushed to the margins of society for no fault of theirs but because of where and when they were born and other unforeseen circumstances). It investigates whether a flipside character is constituted a protagonist or whether this role is given to a flipview character; how this protagonist causes significant social transformations while still flipside (ideal scenario) rather than developed to flipview society; and the protagonist's disposition towards flipside characters. By deploying a critically descriptive methodology, this essay shows that *A Dancer of Fortune* and *The Beatification of Area Boy* deserve flipside criticism but only *The Beatification of Area Boy* qualifies as a flipside work.

Keywords: Flipside, flipview, humanism, literary theory.

Introduction

The history and accomplishments of literature cannot do without literary theory and criticism. Literary criticism is the application of a given literary theory to a literary work whereas literary theory is a particular worldview articulated for this purpose. As Tyson notes, conceptual interpenetrations between literary criticism and literary theory have generated a widespread impression that both terms somewhat mutually identify (6). For Eagleton, no literary theory

exists in isolation for literature but interpenetrates with some other fields of study (*Literary Theory* vii).

A comparative flipside reading of John Munonye's *A Dancer of Fortune* and Wole Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy* requires the establishment of what flipside theory is. This step will also be preceded by a very brief look at relevant aspects of the history of literature and literary theory in modern times.

Understanding Literature and Literary Theory

Notwithstanding the age-old definition of literature as “representation of action” (*mimesis* or imitation) since Aristotle's *Poetics*, scholars continue to seek better definitions. As Eagleton recounts,

In eighteenth century England, the concept of literature was not confined as it sometimes is today to “creative” or “imaginative” writing. It meant the whole body of valued writing in society: philosophy, history, essays and letters as well as poems. What made a text “literary” was not whether it was fictional – the eighteenth century was in grave doubt about whether the new upstart form of the novel was literature at all – but whether it conformed to certain standards of “polite letters”. The criteria of what counted as literature, in other words, were frankly ideological: writing which embodied the values and “tastes” of a particular social class qualified as literature, whereas a street ballad, a popular romance and perhaps even the drama did not. (*Literary Theory* 15)

In addition, Boyd highlights a contrast between traditional views of literature and modern views when he says,

Traditional view of literature tended to see it as reflecting nature, especially human nature, all the way from Plato's discomfort with, or Aristotle's admiration for, *mimesis* to Shakespeare's or Stendhal's images of art as holding the mirror up to nature. Common-sense traditional views of art and literature have easily shaded into transcendental views, widespread because religious beliefs have been so pervasive and because both artists and their patrons in state or church benefit by nurturing a sense of awe at art's putatively divine origins and power. In the twentieth century, first in sociology, anthropology, and even psychology, then by the 1960s in the combination of these with Saussurean

linguistics that produced structuralism and its aftershocks, and therefore impacted on literature, there has been a rejection of human nature as a given and a stress on human nature as the product only of culture and convention. (1-2)

John Dryden has expanded Aristotelian definition of drama from a “representation of action” to include both actions and human nature when he says, “a play ought to be a just and lively image of human nature, reproducing the passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind” (qtd. in Nwabueze 17).

For Tihanov, “The practice of literary theory was just another manifestation, in a very different guise and a very different set of historical circumstances, of beliefs in the relevance of literature” (78). In addition, “What we need especially to bear in mind while studying literature and literary culture is that, while quite different regimes of relevance co-exist at any one time, one of them comes to the fore – whether manifestly or obliquely – as the leading component in the mix” (80). Indeed, literature can emerge from or address felt needs in society.

Approaching a work from a particular point of view (unfortunately) amounts to an eclectic approach. As Suleiman opines, “Political readings – indeed, all interpretations – tend to speak of works as if their meanings and effects were immanent; to convince someone else of the validity of one’s reading, one has to claim, or at least imply, that it is the best reading, the reading most closely corresponding to the ‘work itself’” (192). To curb the negative effects of eclecticism and to advance more comprehensive approaches, Moretti and many other critics call for a multi-methodological approach which, in Moretti’s words, amounts to a “maximum of methodological boldness” (227).

Furthermore, literature and literary theory can lend themselves to ideological use. In this wise, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues that, “Literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society.... Every writer is a writer in politics” (ii). In this regard, Tihanov says,

It seems to me that the rise of literary theory as an autonomous discourse was dependent on the pronounced belief in (a very specific type of) relevance of literature to society. The preoccupation with literature in strictly theoretical terms, as sublimely detached from

social and political concerns and struggles, represented itself solely as a reaction against a long-established Eastern European tradition of glorifying literature as the most important voice in public debates over the nature political life and values of society. Literary theory purported to represent a clean break from the very idea of literature's relevance. (77)

Indeed, where literature and literary theory are not reduced to mere ideological tools, they perform important function in society and diversity in literary theories is an added advantage.

Understanding Flipside Theory

Against the background of literary theories which can now be divided into three categories, namely, theories from a sociological viewpoint (such as Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, New Historicism, and Queer theory), theories from a literary viewpoint or literariness (Formalism, Structuralism, post-Structuralism, and New Criticism), and theories from an interactive viewpoint (reader-response), flipside literary theory has emerged to fill a gap that has been overlooked in literary history. One has also to bear in mind, as Leitch points out, that "The task of literary history is thus only completed when literary production is not only represented synchronically and diachronically in the succession of its systems, but also seen as a special history in its unique relationship" (5).

In contrast with the surprising fact that there has been no literary theory like it developed so far, as if humanity skips a part of its reality when narrative comes to that point, or suffers a blip in memory whenever attention is about to be drawn to it (maybe, the reality impact of victims of social existence on the rest of humanity is such an unacceptable or traumatic experience that, as Freud's psychoanalysis claims for similar situations, the mind chooses to push it out of conscious awareness and repress it in the unconscious/subconscious) while it goes on to attend to other things considered more important, flipside theory rather brings this section of social reality to the fore. It focuses on this flipside sector which, ironically, people (especially, leaders) seem to know much about or encounter daily and for which there can be no forgetting and yet they seemingly forget! Furthermore, civilized society has set a high premium on finding effective and sustainable solutions to those social concerns.

Flipside is the other side of the coin just as flipside society is that other side of society, and this, in both cases, refers to that unseen, not-easily-seen or systematically ignored side which, on the contrary, in equal measure constitutes with the seen or flipview side the total

reality of the coin or of society. The importance and mutual relevance of flipside and flipview to each other, particularly for balance and sustainability, is similar to the saying that it is safer flying an aeroplane on two engines than on one. Additionally, reality is not one sided; half of it lies flipside.

In this wise, the more flipview or mainstream society intentionally or inadvertently ignores and undermines flipside society, the more imbalanced and unsustainable will be society's path to a more humane and fulfilling world.

Flipside society are victims of social existence, that is, people who find themselves pushed to the margins of society not for any fault of theirs but for reasons of where and when they were born and other unforeseen circumstances. These include roadside beggars, dumpster scavengers, poor children hawking goods along the streets and at traffic jams, homeless people, impoverished petty traders, hapless refugees and migrants, poorly educated and jobless people due to poverty, people wrongly accused and punished for crimes, and other such categories of disadvantaged people.

It will come with some rude shock to realize that the world talks so much about how best to lift the world's disadvantaged people out of their miseries and (re-)integrate them with mainstream society – talk about the 8-point Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) program of the United Nations which has metamorphosed into a 17-point Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) program, or the thousands of foundations, charities and individuals in parts of the world all campaigning to alleviate poverty, empower people, and unite society, – and yet, there has been no single literary theory solely or primarily dedicated to this humanitarian ideal!

Yes, there is Marxist theory which explores matters concerning exploited workers and the poor, as Jameson points out, but this is only a secondary part of a broader and multi-tasking concern with economic theory, political theory, historical theory, and religious theory. In addition, the concept of victims of social existence is broader than Marxism's proletariat.

Furthermore, yes, there is feminist theory but that already shows how limited its purview is since it is primarily focused on female welfare whereas the purview of victims of social existence extends equally to both male and female. It is also important to note that advocacy for female welfare already has feminist (literary) theory, a point that Warhol, Warhol-Down, and Herndl foreground, and which now multitasks to include abortion rights, equal rights and equal pay discourse, divorce and single parenting, the LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

queer, intersex, asexual) movement (whose scope now extends to “gender fluid” and other yet-to-be-coined “identities”), and even liberal versus conservative politics. As Fiss points out, two judgments by the Supreme Court of the United States galvanized feminism, namely, *Griswold v. Connecticut* [381 U.S. 479 (1965)] which “established a constitutional right to privacy and protected access to birth control,” and *Roe v. Wade* [410 U.S. 113 (1973)] which “built on *Griswold* to set aside laws criminalizing abortion” (414).

In addition, Queer literary theory (or gender studies) has distinctively emerged from feminism to particularly address gender-related (cisgender versus transgender) issues in society and literature.

On the contrary, flipside literary theory explores how works of literature depict victims of social existence and is solely and comprehensively interested in whether a plot constitutes a victim of social existence its protagonist or rather gives that role to a flipview character; whether this protagonist causes significant transformations in society (for instance, the rise or fall of important individuals, groups, or social processes) while still a member of flipside society (in the ideal situation) rather than developed to flipview society (which underscores the point that marginalized people also matter and disregarding them impacts society negatively); and whether the disposition of the protagonist (and some other characters) towards other victims of social existence is favourable and empowering, favourable and disempowering, unfavourable and empowering or unfavourable and disempowering.

While flipside criticism can be done on any literary work to see whether it contains all, some or none of the three determinant features aforementioned, a work must contain all three determinant features to qualify as a flipside work. It is not a flipside work if it contains only one or two of them. In addition, and on a significant note, while flipside criticism uncovers whether a protagonist is a flipside or flipview character and the nature of the protagonist's disposition towards victims of social existence, a work must have a flipside character as the protagonist and the protagonist's disposition towards victims of social existence must be favourable and empowering (which falls in line with the global objective to treat disadvantaged people favourably and empower them too) to qualify as a flipside work.

Of course, there is no mistaking the humanism at the heart of flipside theory but flipside theory does not fasten itself to the atheism or irreligion associated with mainline humanism. Flipside humanism turns attention on the human on its own terms as human, as does mainline

humanism, but does not discourage or exclude contributions from religion where applicable. If some marginalized people subscribe to religion, that reality must be worked into their humanist equation rather than impugned. Flipside humanism is open-minded (in line with the modern world's gravitation towards multiculturalism) rather than antagonistic where religion is considered constituted in rather than extrinsic to what makes those people human, part of their true selves, part of an immense universe or the foundation of their social existence.

Benneth and Royle note that especially since the nineteenth century, literary criticism has shown a strong leaning towards humanism, which is seen, for instance, in F. R. Leavis' calling of attention on human culture and the autonomy of the human spirit (227). They also note that the rise of humanism (the human approached on its own terms as "human" rather than in relation to religious or biological worldviews), particularly between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (as Foucault and some scholars opine), conveniently occurred at a time when Europeans, as they went on to colonize parts of the world, needed ideologies that would justify their exploitative and dehumanizing treatments of indigenous populations (226) who they described as less human, without souls, gravely handicapped in arts and sciences and deserving of inhumanities meted out to them (allegedly) on the way to civilizing them. Humanism came in handy and was used to credit Europeans with being human and deserving of humane treatment while denying colonized people of the same.

Furthermore, just as the law of excluded middle – one must, for instance, either be a man or not a man, and no middle ground – informed some of the segregative, exploitative and dehumanizing practices of the modern world (Habib 46), tendentious philosophical and legal frameworks also emerged to back up colonial inhumanities. These included the *Code noire* or French edict of March 1685 (article 44 declares: "We declare slaves as movable property."), the *Jim Crow* laws (1896-1965) of the Confederate states of America, and the apartheid laws (1948-1991) of South Africa. In the sixteenth century, Dominican Friars of the Viceroyalty of New Spain – popular among which was Bartolomé de Las Casas – heroically came to the defense of indigenous American Indian populations of Mesoamerica by presenting convincing arguments to Spanish colonialists that the natives were equally human like them and also secured the abolishment of the *encomienda* system (Herrington 157). It is for such reasons that, "Humanism, the logic of humanity, in other words, is also a dehumanizing discourse" (Benneth and Royle 226).

Flipside humanism rather brings up for objective criticism every exploitative, marginalizing and dehumanizing ideology or practice.

Application of Flipside Criticism to *A Dancer of Fortune* and *The Beatification of Area Boy*

Aya Ijeroko, the protagonist in John Munonye's novel, *A Dancer of Fortune*, is a vagabond since "many held that he was a tramp, with no abode and no kith and kin in this world" (21), a school drop-out (56) and a challenge of shame to Bessie, his wife (64). *A Dancer of Fortune*, thus, establishes Ayasko, as he is popularly known, as a flipside character.

Ayasko discovers his outstanding talent for dancing and builds a career out of it (5, 153). He describes it as probably his husband (36) and likens his skill to that of civil servants who write with hands while he writes with his feet (11, 108, 66). He also describes medicine as his fatherland (70), a mindset that enables him to skip from one employer to another (20) rather than tie up his future with anyone. Furthermore, Ayasko sets in motion a succession of events during which he outfoxes the foxes seeking to exploit him (21) and positions himself for a hostile takeover of their business turfs. This way, he proves that flipside society also matters.

Wole Soyinka's drama, *The Beatification of Area Boy*, establishes Sanda, the protagonist, as a flipside character alongside close allies such as Trader, Barber, Mama Put, Boyko, Area Two Four, and Minstrel. Left with no option than to do a security job at a shopping plaza despite his university education, Sanda confesses "There are days when I feel I have never been anywhere else but here" (65). In addition, the sight of him always sitting on a particular chair at a particular observation post creates similar impressions in some people (65).

Furthermore, using Boyko's circumstances as a reference point, Sanda highlights the impoverishment of most people around there when he says, "I know his mother's house – if you can call it that. More like a shack for storing firewood but – that's the way life is for many around Ita Balogun" (45). Sanda had taken over care and mentorship of Boyko right from when Boyko was a skinny seven year old spotted scavenging and eating right out of the gutters (60). Boyko's life story (60, 76) is similar to that of other people who identify as Area Boys notorious for street life and disruptive activities and who pay homage to Sanda, the "King of the Area Boys" (102).

It is important to note that, in *A Dancer of Fortune*, the narrative ends at a court scene just before it gets under way and just before Ayasko appropriates solid legal grounds on which to erect his rise to flipview society were he to win a case of fraud brought against him.

In *The Beatification of Area Boy*, Miseyi turns out to be the decisive factor that upends the aspirations of two bourgeois families that organized an ostentatious party featuring marriage proposal between her and her suitor (90-97). During the ceremony, she, on impulse and not out of love (99, 103), reneges and presents the customary gourd of wine to Sanda instead, which makes Sanda the actual cause of that social disruption. Furthermore, despite Miseyi's bourgeois background, Sanda and Miseyi do not end up members of the elite but even had to go underground and grapple with poverty like other Maroko residents victimized by the military government (103).

Sanda actually had chances of a brighter future (49), including rejecting a good job offer (55) but chooses to sacrifice all that for a dream: to drop out of school, quickly make a huge amount of money and channel all of it towards a revolutionary overthrow of a corrupt government and usher in better times for everyone (49-50). It is also for this purpose that he develops a "conga ideology" (68) whereby "the conga law of equity / Yields economic parity" (lines 25-26) and rallies people of kindred spirit (especially, prisoners) together around its subversive music (103). Sanda's ideological application of musical art falls in line with Walter Benjamin's view that "the revolutionary artist should not uncritically accept the existing forces of artistic production, but should develop and revolutionize those forces" (qtd. in Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 29).

Sanda's socially transformative vision includes reforming and reintegrating his Area Boys with law-abiding society (100-101). This falls in line with research already carried out on the need and best ways to build bridges and partnerships with people at the margins of society such as a combined work by Nelson, Prilleltensky and MacGillivray and another by Hansen, Andersen, and Clark.

In *A Dancer of Fortune*, Ayasko shows reasonable grasp of capitalist socio-economy. Armed with nothing more than a talent for dancing and jokes, he sets out to exploit the very system designed to exploit people like him. Granted that "When business is good, commission is high" (18), Ayasko sets his sights on a secret long-term plan of breaking away and establishing his own business (177-178).

The Beatification of Area Boy's Sanda and his allies share the view that the system is broken and that the elite who gain from it will never willingly allow changes to be introduced. It then devolves on victims of the broken system to rise in revolt and force those changes on society, including exploiting the weaknesses of the elite (62). This vision dovetails with "Thesis 11" of Marx's *Thesis of Feuerbach*, which says, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."

Rebellion against a failed system might be as simple as Barber putting on an *agbada* at a public ceremony to becloud class distinctions (89), using money to pit policemen against soldiers (101) or Sanda using a gang to rob wealthy shoppers (23, 46, 75). For Sanda and his allies, their crimes are nothing compared to high end corruption among the elite who, however, never get punished by the law (102). Indeed, as Gupta, Davoodi, and Alonso-Terme underscore, corruption and weak government institutions worsen inequalities in society.

In *A Dancer of Fortune*, Ayasko's bid to exploit the exploiters includes craftily working petty jealousies and rivalries between patent medicine dealers in Dekko to his advantage. His policy of skipping from one employer to a rival (15, 70-71), undeterred even by family alliances (16, 20), leaves him pursuing his career from one end of Dekko to the other. His last employer's shop, Eddy Chindi's Deo Volente Medicine Stores, "was situated on the outskirts of the town, far away from Avarido Medicals as well as from the remains of Marabu Medicines, and further still from Sabanco and Sons" where he had begun the journey (92-93).

Ayasko's machinations also inevitably suck major drug companies, namely, King's Chemist, Lailai Pharmaceuticals, Umaco Drug Store, and Necco Drugs, into the crisis which he also exploits (164-166, 168-170, 181-182). It is important to note that by finally securing a four bedroom flat along Okenze Street in a conducive "partially commercial and partially residential" part of town (158-160) for his family's living quarters and his fraudulently acquired Ayasko Medical Stores, Ayasko loses membership of flipside society, for which reason *A Dancer of Fortune* also loses every claim of being a flipside work.

With regard to *A Dancer of Fortune* and *The Beatification of Area Boy*, on the matter of how a work might deserve flipside criticism but not qualify as a flipside work, *A Dancer of Fortune* fails one of the core requirements of a flipside work for having developed its flipside protagonist, Ayasko, to membership of flipview society. This conclusion was arrived at through

flipside criticism. On the contrary, similar flipside criticism of *The Beatification of Area Boy* shows it qualifies as a flipside work for upholding all its three requirements.

Indeed, this distinction can be meaningfully applied between other literary works, for example, between *The Holy Heist* and *The Beggars' Strike*. In *The Holy Heist*, Austen, the protagonist, is a mentally challenged young man who evolves to become critical to the success and failure of powerful individuals, political parties and religious organizations while still a flipside character despite being later moved to a well-furnished home for disadvantaged people. The work also upholds the other two requirements.

The Beggars' Strike, on the contrary, as explored by Beeman for instance, does not constitute any or all the beggars in question its protagonists but rather a member of the ruling class, Mour Ndiaye. Ndiaye's disposition towards these beggars is unfavourable and disempowering since he ridicules and maltreats them. However, the beggars effectively trigger social transformations by collectively going on a strike that makes it impossible for the elite to fulfil the Islamic requirement of almsgiving. This social crisis torpedoes Ndiaye's vice presidential ambitions.

While Sanda's subversive conga song in *The Beatification of Area Boy* criticizes unfair business practices, for instance, pharmaceutical companies that seek profit in ways that compromise public health (48-52, 69), Ayasko's quest for bourgeois lifestyle in *A Dancer of Fortune* rather includes personally or colluding with the elite to exploit the poor (1). His willingness to advance himself even at the expense of others (157, 182-187) is aptly described by one of his slogans, "A dance of the feet, not of the heart" (104). Ayasko also convinces Eddy Chindi to orchestrate a false job advertisement that inconveniences hundreds of job-seekers (133-135) just to intimidate their competitors (138).

While in *A Dancer of Fortune* Ayasko parrots the cliché, "If the illness continues, go and see a doctor" (39, 93) in self-delusional justification for helping medicine dealers sell ineffective or expired drugs to the poor and also enables the dispensing of wrong medications for poorly diagnosed ailments, in *The Beatification of Area Boy*, Sanda and his allies rather close ranks with other victims of social existence for somewhat noble objectives (82-88). Their rebellious calls for a fairer world underscore the view that "Good governance refers to the question of how a society can organize itself to ensure equality of opportunity and equity (social and economic justice) for

all citizens. Good governance is a value in itself, but it is also the most critical means for achieving the [Sustainable] Development Goals” of the United Nations (Cheema 31).

For Sanda's people, government's use of action and inaction to put the masses at a social disadvantage is an act of war and they must respond appropriately (76-77). This dovetails with the Marxist call on the proletariat to overthrow their oppressors and create a perfect society. In general, the path chosen by Sanda and his allies is determined by their desire to rescue “battered humanity” (74) from chains forged by the elite (77, 80).

Conclusion

Flipside literary criticism fills a gap overlooked even in modern times. It investigates whether or not a plot constitutes a victim of social existence its protagonist; whether this protagonist causes significant social transformations while still flipside; and whether the protagonist's disposition towards fellow victims of social existence is favourable and empowering.

A flipside criticism of *A Dancer of Fortune* and *The Beatification of Area Boy* shows that while they deserve flipside reading, only *The Beatification of Area Boy* qualifies as a flipside work.

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