

ADAPTING BENJAMIN KWAKYE'S *THE CLOTHES OF NAKEDNESS* AS A FILM: AN ESSAY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the usefulness of adapting the novel, *The Clothes of Nakedness* by Benjamin Kwakye (1998) as a film. This adaptation is relevant because the novel presents themes, language and gender issues pertaining to Ghana and by extension Africa as a whole. The thematic issues could be relevant to other parts of the world which share similar characteristics. While values that could promote development seem to receive little attention, there is a growing tendency among the youth to watch movies and other entertainment programmes. This growing inclination among the youth could be harnessed to promote values such as those depicted in the novel analysed for this study. Feminism and feminist reception theory have been employed in this study. This essay employs text analysis and literary appreciation to analyse and discuss *The Clothes of Nakedness* in terms of the values, characters and other literary techniques in the novel to demonstrate the usefulness of adapting the novel as a film. The title of the novel, *The Clothes of Nakedness*, derives from an Akan proverb which states that, 'Se Kwatrikwa se obe mawu ntuma-a, tie ne din' to wit, 'If Nakedness promises you clothes, take note of his name.' The title is a satirical reference to people who pose as wealthy, yet do not have anything but rather depend ironically on the very people they claim to assist. Mystique Mysterious typifies this pauper but it also reflects the incompetence of the men in the novel who are

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supposed to support their female counterparts.

As an outline, the paper begins with the concept of adaptation and proceeds with a synopsis of the novel. The paper further discusses the Feminist theory and how it underpins the study. There is the discussion and analysis based mainly on gender and feminist theory and the language of the novel is also examined.

The Concept of Adaptation

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines adaptation as 'a film or television programme that is based on a book or play.' It further defines adaptation as 'the process of changing something to make it suitable for a new situation' such as 'adaptation to the environment.' It is a process that involves to 'move from the telling to the showing mode' (Hutcheon, 2006: 38). By harnessing the advantages of film as a medium of mass communication, the paper hopes that the values embedded in the novel could be disseminated through film as a medium of mass communication. By adaptation, the message in the cold novel is revitalised and communicated to diverse audience by showing the film on television and YouTube. The few reviews available seem to dwell on corruption, men addicted to alcohol and the influence of the poor by the rich. For instance, Ogunseiju (2012) observes that *The Clothes of Nakedness* portrays the relationship between the rich and the poor in urban Ghana and how the rich could influence the decisions of the poor. Ogunseiju (ibid) raises issues of corruption, manipulation of the poor by the rich and alcoholism but does not deal with the moral aptitude of the women and their industrious nature which are values worth emulating.

Obviously, the novel under review tells the story of Africa in a struggle for development while much of the labour force remains inept. The use of film as a medium of mass communication to educate and inform an audience about critical values is a step towards socio-cultural and economic development.

Synopsis of the Novel

The Clothes of Nakedness is a novel which has its setting in Nima, a suburb of Accra, and it recounts the tragedy of the major character, Gabriel Bukari. Bukari has lost his job as a driver in the employment of a wealthy merchant because he has had an affair with the daughter of his boss, Fati, which resulted in a pregnancy. Bukari and Fati are compelled to struggle through

life for survival. Their only son, Baba, who is the price for their error is a high school truant. Bukari becomes unemployed for eight months and Fati, takes care of the family single-handedly through petty trading. Being idle, Bukari joins other men daily at a drinking bar known as 'Kill Me Quick'. His companions are Kojo Ansah and Kofi Ntim. Kojo Ansah is noted for speaking little, yet 'proficient in contemplation' and drank only water and juice. Kofi Ntim, also known as Philosopher Nonsense is described as ugly and short standing below five feet, yet he is full of jokes. These men, chief patrons of Esi's pub reflect the negative characteristics of men.

Also, in Bukari's house are other men who can hardly cater for their family. There is Jojo's father and Issaka who begs Fati for a tin of sardines and snatches it away before Bukari can stop him. As the story unfolds, Mystique Mysterious, a sly fellow who poses as a rich man, joins the three men at the drinking bar and buys them drinks. He capitalises on Bukari's unemployment and desperation and arranges with Henry Denyi to hire Bukari as a taxi driver. As his commission, Mystique Mysterious demands fifteen per cent of Bukari's monthly earnings. Gradually, Mystique Mysterious ruins Bukari by taking him to public places, womanising and drinking after which he will ask the unsuspecting Bukari to pay the bills.

Meanwhile, Mystique Mysterious gives marijuana to the young men of Nima such as Dada and Yaw Cake to smoke. Later, Mystique Mysterious tries to rape Bukari's wife, Fati in his absence in the latter's room. Being a faithful wife, she resists but Bukari suspects his wife, leading to a strain in their marriage and his relationship with Mystique Mysterious. Mystique causes the taxi to be taken away from Bukari. Bukari, who is unemployed once again, resorts to drinking heavily and is knocked down by a car and dies.

Feminism and Feminist Reception Theory

Feminist theory aims at interrogating gender inequalities so as to cause changes in economic or political power imbalances. Postcolonial literature has been defined as any piece of writing which has been 'affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day' (Ashcroft et al., (1989: 2). It is in this light that Quayson (2000) views post colonialism as a changing complex process that must take contemporary culture into account. In this sense, post colonialism is concerned, *inter alia*, with asserting cultural identity and revising history and cultural models. As

a post-colonial text, the novel indirectly points out the inertia that hinders Africa from development. For, while the men in the novel such as Bukari, Kofi Ntim, Kojo Ansah and Jojo's father are not engaged in serious employment, the women, on the other hand, such as Fati and her fellows in the market, and Esi are frantically engaged in economic activities. The female characters are therefore prominent in the lead for the economic emancipation of Africa. This scenario is buttressed by the assertion of Clark and Manu (1990) that during the period of the Structural Adjustment programme in Ghana, with its emphasis on price incentives, there would be a subtle reliance on traders in the markets to transmit these benefits to those specific sectors whose imbalances the structural adjustment programme sought to adjust. This assumption was based on the 1984 population census which indicated that female traders constituted 89% of all persons engaged in selling activities.

Related to feminism is feminist reception theory which has been developed in media studies. Radway (1984, cited in Baran & Davies, 2009: 246) indicated that men are 'routinely presented as strong, aggressive, and heroic, whereas women are weak, passive, and dependent.' In this light, women are expected to 'gain their identity through their association with a male character' (ibid).

Women constitute a large section of the Ghanaian population and in 2014 the female population constituted 51.7 percent of the population and males, 48.3 percent (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). According to Amu (n.d.), 'Women form almost half of the economically active population and are found in all sectors of the economy.' Besides, 'women form over 70% of the entrepreneurs involved in micro and small-scale businesses, which contribute substantially to national income. Their predominance is found in the following subsectors: trade, small-scale manufacturing and food processing' (Amu, n.d.: 20). Similar trends are seen in other African countries as noted by Snyder and Tadesse (1995). In effect, African women have contributed substantially to the sustenance of families and the growth of their individual communities; however, women have not been accorded the right recognition in their endeavours. Kwakye's construction of women's roles in his novel is thus in tandem with the findings in contemporary social research on the socio-economic role of women in Africa.

In early post-independence novels by Africans such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979) and *The African*

Child by Camara Laye (1959) women are given lesser prominence than men. *Things Fall Apart* vividly illustrates the subsidiary role to which women were relegated. Derogatory terms were used to describe them; for instance, it was said that yam was a man's crop. It was not expected that a woman could cultivate yams because of the labour-intensive nature of its cultivation. Also, in *So Long a Letter*, women are reminded that their words would not carry weight unless they are educated and possess certificates. Thus, in some earlier African novels women were not assigned roles as leaders or characters who demonstrably reflected leadership.

However, Achebe in his later novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988), one of the female characters, Beatrice Okoh has another name, 'Nwanyibuife,' which means 'a female is also something'. This portrays Achebe's acknowledgement of the role of females. Today, women as entrepreneurs can engage and manage labour and other mechanical resources to achieve better results.

A careful study of Benjamin Kwakye's novel, *The Clothes of Nakedness*, reveals that most of the female characters are enterprising. Generally, the feminist reception theory focuses *inter alia*, on an in-depth understanding of how audience interpret media content and the way the media are used in everyday social contexts (Baran & Davies, 2009). In the light of this, if young girls watch a film that is adapted from this novel, they may relate positively to the female characters and imbibe the values which they exude.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Based on Fairclough (2003), in analysing the text, an attempt was made to understand 'what words or sentences or longer stretches of text mean' as well as 'what speakers' mean (Fairclough, 2003: 11). There are several reasons why this adaptation is relevant. The portrayal of women in *The Clothes of Nakedness* and the ethical values which the novel presents appear not yet to have been examined by scholars. *The Clothes of Nakedness*, which is Benjamin Kwakye's first novel, received the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the best first book in the Africa Region in 1999, a year after its publication. Besides the values, it being an award-winning novel is one of the reasons for its selection for this study. The story is set in Nima, a suburb of Accra during the early post-independence era in Ghana. The reference to Opera

cinema depicts that period when videos were not common and the youth would often go to entertain themselves at popular cinemas such as Opera.

The language is simple and, using the third person omniscient narrator, it presents ethical values such as hard work, perseverance and honesty which are mostly exhibited by the female characters in the novel. These values could be transmitted to the youth if the novel is adapted to film as a medium of mass communication. Additionally, the adaptation will utilise the effects of television viewing on audience thereby leading them to 'make appropriate changes in attitudes or beliefs or produce the desired behavioural responses' (Severen & Tankard, 2001: 73). These values, if imbibed, could inspire the African youth to contribute towards Africa's development. The novel also presents the lack of focus, creativity and ineptitude of the male characters which serves as a warning to the youth.

Moreover, as a post-colonial text, it echoes thematic issues that pertain to the rest of Africa in its bid for development. Development is considered mainly as a behavioural concept and 'the capability to perform satisfactorily the functions appropriate to the object, such as society or institution, said to be developed' (Gyekye, 2004: 38-39). In this regard, the characters in this novel may be said to have developed if they can respond to their own needs and the needs of their society. However, in the case of the male characters in *The Clothes of Nakedness*, it is a case of ineffectiveness and resignation to fate. They are not able to think, create and respond to the needs of the society or environment. Consequently, they allow themselves to be manipulated by others, typified by Mystique, who parade themselves as rich men yet have nothing to offer.

Furthermore, films have become attractive to Ghanaian youth today and the popularity of telenovelas and Nigerians films are cases in point. It is possible therefore in adapting novels such as this current one to cultivate desirable values in the youth for development. For instance, the theme of love which dominates the scenes in telenovelas is an attractive element. The telenovela titled, *'Passion and Power'* is an example. Eladio Gómez Luna and Arturo Montenegro are both businessmen who are in rivalry for the love of Julia. Curiously, Arturo, Julia's original fiancé still loves her even though he has married another woman (www.mediaguidegroup.com). Another telenovela which thrives on the theme of love is *'Italian Bride Episode 100'*. This film is a complex plot with several love stories intertwined (www.mediaguidegroup.com).

com). Due to the popularity of the telenovela, one of the television stations in Ghana, the Universal TV (UTV) has started showing telenovelas with voice over in Twi. As in the telenovelas, the theme of love is manifest in *The Clothes of Nakedness*. The love between Bukari and Fati and the attempt by Mystique Mysterious to seduce Fati are elements which may attract the audience. Youthful love is also depicted in the relationship between two adolescents, Baba and Adukwei.

Gender and Feminist Roles towards Development

Another reason why this adaptation is useful is that feminist roles are highlighted in the novel and women are depicted as models in their contribution towards development. Women have sometimes been cast in a negative light (Nnaemeka, 1997; Radway, 1984, cited in Baran & Davies, 2009). On the contrary, Kwakye (1998) presents women as enterprising leaders. The first woman we encounter in the novel is Esi, the owner of the liquor kiosk known as Kill Me Quick. She is about forty 'engaged in light-hearted conversation with her customers' (Kwakye, 1998: 2). She is 'beautiful and that age had cheated her of beauty only a little; her features unwrinkled as yet, exuded an affable and easy charm that many of the young women lacked' (ibid). While she demonstrates good reasoning and business acumen, the men while away time aimlessly drinking alcohol in her pub. Even Mystique Mysterious who poses as a rich man does not work but only feeds on others to gratify his insatiable taste for extravagance. After arranging with Mr Denyi to employ Bukari as a taxi driver, Mystic Mysterious milks Bukari of his resources and finally makes advances to Bukari's wife, which leads to the ruining of Bukari's home. He introduces the youth of Nima 441 to marijuana and alcohol and it is suspected that he is the one who murdered Bukari with his Mercedes Benz. In fact, the group of men who often meet at Kill Me Quick symbolically represent men in the postcolonial African era and their lack of the sense of responsibility to develop their homes and their nation.

The transmission of values is also referred to as the socialisation function of the media (Dominick, 2002). Socialization implies 'the ways an individual comes to adopt the behaviour and values of a group' (Dominick, 2002: 40). Kofi Ntim tells Mystique Mysterious, 'You are like this weakling here.' This reference is to Kojo Ansah the quiet one who drank only water and juice. According to Kofi Ntim:

A man has to imbibe like a man; drink strong powerful liquor that

burns your inside like fire. I do not like hearing nonsense such as "I do not drink liquor". There's no alcohol so strong that a real man can't drink it. (Kwakye, 1998: 5)

To this remark, Esi retorts, 'How about women? Can a real woman drink liquor like a real man?' This dialogue raises the question of what it is that defines gender or feminism. Again, on the morning Bukari is sacked, he asks the vendor, 'Do you think it is alright for men to cry?' The woman vending the palm wine remarked, 'I take it you are assuming that it is all right for women to cry. And if so, why not men?' (Kwakye, 1998: 190). Similarly, Radway (1984) has noted that in romance novels men are 'routinely presented as strong, aggressive, and heroic, whereas women are weak, passive, and dependent' (Radway, 1984; cited in Baran & Davies, 2009). In the same vein, Hagan (2006) writing on 'Gender: Evolving Roles and Perceptions' observes that, cultural beliefs, values and attitudes determine perceptions of gender roles in a society and these perceptions influence what men and women consider appropriate as their roles. Contrary to these negative constructions of gender by society, Kwakye tries to deconstruct this and endeavours to reconstruct a new image for the African woman. The negative construct of gender roles may be revised through the watching of the adapted film being proposed in this study and similar works which may come up.

Another value which is worth propagating through film is the hard work of the female characters. The second chapter of the novel which is devoted to Fati and her family also demonstrates how some women have been contributing towards Africa's development and deserve to be put in the limelight. For several months, it is Fati who takes care of the family because her husband is jobless. She wakes up early to do her house chores while her unemployed husband is still in bed. Baba their son, like his father will still be 'sealed in the envelope of sleep' (Kwakye, 1998: 15). Fati feels 'disappointed with a son who at sixteen was a high school truant'; he is 'good natured, but still worthless' (Kwakye, 1998: 15). Issaka, Fati's neighbour, is another ne'er – do- well. He enters Fati's room and virtually steals a tin of sardines because his wife has given birth to a new baby and he cannot afford a tin of sardines.

Additionally, the female characters are presented as strong and prudent managers. Adukwei is another female character who is a model that represents the inherent strength in a woman. Twice on the same day, she saves Baba from being beaten up. This girl eventually becomes Baba's

fiancée. She demonstrates the prudent management skill which a woman can have. She cautions Baba: 'You haven't stopped spending money ever since we met...I think you should keep your money. Save it for something you really want for yourself...You can spend as much as you like when you start working' (Kwakye, 1998: 93). In response, Baba looked into the sky and said, 'Adukwei, you are as brilliant as that bright star' (Kwakye, 1998: *ibid*). The dependency syndrome of the male characters is further demonstrated on two occasions when Baba is about to be beaten up and it is his lover, Adukwei, who saves him. Baba, like the other young men who accept marijuana from Mystique Mysterious, can only depend on other people for survival. Hence, Baba sells newspapers for Mystique Mysterious and goes to weed at Henry Denyi's house for a little amount of money.

The film will also be useful because by giving women the opportunity to watch themselves in an adapted film, they will come to appreciate what they are and reconstruct their own image of themselves. This is because 'by watching, listening, and reading', the women will 'learn how people are supposed to act and what values are important' (Dominick, 2002: 40) as well as appreciate their own importance.

Thus, in the novel under discussion, it is the women like Esi, Fati and Adukwei who are aggressive and heroic whereas the men like Bukari, Issaka and Baba are weak, passive and dependent. Also, while Esi is established in her liquor business the men can only drink and while away the time aimlessly. Kojo Ansah seems to realise the dependency situation when he tries to encourage his friends to let them fight collectively against Mystique Mysterious. His friends claim they cannot do anything and he tells them:

We are the most pathetic of creatures. We are insulted, but we can't insult; taken advantage of, but we can't take advantage of others. It started slowly and then it grew until where we once had the urge to yell, now we can only sit and talk in whispers, whimpering like kicked dogs, moaning, enslaved by a good nature transformed over time into a foolish weakness (Kwakye, 1998: 176).

Notwithstanding his admonition, Kofi Ansah is left to fight the fight against the enemy, Mystique Mysterious, alone.

Again, the adapted film may teach the males in Ghana, and by extension Africa, to learn useful values. This concept of transmitting values from the novel to film borders on the cultivation theory which explains ‘the effects of television viewing on people’s perceptions, attitudes, and values’ (Severen & Tankard, 2001: 268). The ineptitude of the males in the novel is a social tragedy which may be cured by letting the audience watch the reality of their world in an adapted film.

The Language in the Novel

The language of the novel is yet another factor which makes the novel suitable for adaptation. A common structural characteristic of language in the novel is the use of simple sentences which makes it easy to understand. For instance, the first chapter opens with the sentence: ‘He moved slowly like a bred chameleon’ and then the third sentence reads: ‘The only swiftness in his movements was the sharp motion his tongue flickering through his lips and back again’ (Kwakye, 1998: 1). The image of a chameleon has an indigenous undertone of determination. There is a saying in Twi that *‘bosom ketene name briber, ode briber baker ne fore’* (The chameleon walks slowly, yet it will surely get to its destination). Thus, Mystic Mysterious, like a chameleon, will achieve his objective even though he may appear calm.

The study noted that most paragraphs commence with simple independent clauses. Besides, where there are considerable dialogues the sentences are terse. Symbolically, the short sentences may be considered as a reflection of the atmosphere of lack of progress in the novel. Besides, the presence of numerous dialogues makes the text suitable for adaptation to a film.

The novel is replete with simple words and wise sayings which will serve as lessons to the audience. Following are examples of such wise sayings: ‘As on most nights, Mystique Mysterious did not desire to drink...It dulled the intelligence, and he needed to preserve the keenness of his mind in order to attain his prize’ (p.2). The statement indirectly warns the youth of the hazard of alcoholism and the possibility of being misused when drunk. Another example of the profound statements is the following remark about Kojo Ansah, one of the characters: ‘He was a man renowned for being deficient in expression and proficient in contemplation’ (p.3). This statement underscores the relevance of reasoning rather than mere talk. In effect, using Kojo Ansah, the narrator enjoins the youth to spend their energy in creative thinking rather than indulging in conversation which will yield no benefits.

When Mystique Mysterious tries to convince Kofi Ntim to resign his position as labourer for the City Council so that he, Mysterious, will get him a taxi to drive, Kofi is sceptical and remarks: 'Nobody does good just for the sake of doing good. We always do good as a means to an end, never as an end in itself.' Kofi Ntim further makes a thoughtful remark about philanthropists:

Look, some of them are disguised misanthropists who conceal their true nature under the cloak of good works... Some do it because they have what you could call good hearts, but even they are doing it so that their hearts will remain good. They do it because it gives them a sense of happiness, or perhaps it assuages a sense of guilt. "Why is it that I have so much, while others have so little? Let me give some away so that I may convince myself that I have not done my fellow humans ill." Whatever it is, the end is something other than just helping people' (p.55).

The foregoing profound statement cautions the youth to be critical rather than passive recipients of whatever they are offered. Hence, underlying the statement is the importance of critical thinking in business transactions so that opportunities can be maximised for the development of the youth and Africa in general. Additionally, the statement could pass for a thematic monologue that is directed at an audience in a film. There are several other profound statements in the novel so that while the audience are entertained by watching the adapted film, they will be better educated and informed.

Based on fidelity and inter-textuality theories of adaptation, it is the view of this study that in adapting the novel to film, it should be modified so that the film is not a mere reproduction of the novel. The elements such as values and language being promoted to film should be involved 'since adaptations typically mingle literary and cinematic genre' (Stam, 2005: 25). Hopefully, the modifications will make the work suitable for the screen and the needs of society.

CONCLUSION

The selected text, *The Clothes of Nakedness*, was analysed to examine the factors for which the novel could be suitable for adaptation to film. The study was conducted mainly through literary or text analysis. The study revealed that Feminist roles are emphasized in the novel and women are depicted as models who contribute towards development. Therefore, the hardwork of

the female characters as well as other values which they exude is a cardinal factor that makes the novel suitable for adaptation to film. Moreover, as a post-colonial text, if transmuted into a film, the thematic issues would be relevant to the rest of Africa in the quest for development. The study further reveals that the language in the novel is simple and could be suitable for dialogues in a film.

In traditional African society, storytelling was highly regarded because it was a medium through which knowledge was transmitted from one generation to the other. Additionally, storytelling was a medium of transmitting important aspects of a society's culture. Camara Laye in his novel, *The African Child*, recounts how he would hear 'recalled the lofty deeds of my father's ancestors, and the names of these ancestors from the earliest times' (Laye, 1981: 23). The praise-singer 'was not allowed to take too many liberties with tradition, for it is part of the praise-singer's task to preserve it' (ibid). Today, the roles of the story teller and the praise-singer have shifted largely to the novelist, the film writer and director. Since technology has captured the interest of the Ghanaian and, by extension, the African, this current study endorses the paradigm shift by which novels such as the one discussed in this study are adapted to film. Baran (ibid) has observed that 'the skilled, beneficial use of media technologies is the goal of media literacy' (p. 38). Hence, it is hoped that the novel and the film will play complementary roles in educating, informing and entertaining the African audience and even other audiences who appreciate African values and culture.

In conclusion, one may say that if the novel is adapted to film, and other mass communication media such as YouTube and television are employed in its broadcast, an agenda setting strategy, which aims at promoting values for development, will be fulfilled. For, television is 'the medium that has become one of the most powerful communicative forces in the history of civilisation' (Bittner, 1989: 116). The film which will be adapted from *The Clothes of Nakedness* will serve as a window through which the audience will appreciate the reality of their world, be challenged to re-examine themselves so as to bring about a change in their lives and society at large. Hence, the film as 'a culturally special medium' (Baran, 2004: 73) may serve as agent of social and cultural change. The paper recommends that in the 21st century, the contribution of the African woman must be acknowledged and the prejudices against women must be avoided. The men must also endeavour to play their part as partners in development.

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