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The 'Linking Character': A Valuable Tool for African Playwrights

Faustina Brew
Department of Theatre Arts
University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.
faubw@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The playwright's story is often bigger than what the stage can take within a stipulated time frame. It then becomes imperative for the writer to effect significant cutbacks which might involve character mergers, setting eliminations, story condensations, event narrations and expressional conciseness. This becomes a daunting task to especially amateur writers and sometimes those who have significant experience in writing. One of the techniques to accomplish the aforementioned and still retain desired meaning is to use what I call the 'linking character.' Linking characters are given different names in various plays. For instance, Aidoo calls the linking character in *Anowa*, 'The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper' whilst Yaw Asare uses 'Ananse' in his play, *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*. Despite such distinct names, they ultimately function in similar ways. This article assesses the roles of linking characters in eight selected African plays regarding their

purposes and effectiveness. Varied situations, dialogue and other issues are cited from these plays and analysed in correlation with available literature. The article also popularises the efficacy of utilisation of linking characters and recommends them for up and coming African Playwrights.

Keywords: playwright, gaps, audience, linking character, rapport

Introduction

Fraser and Bayley (2015) and Archer (2015) as well as other writers of playwriting books admit there are no strict rules as to how to write a play. Playwriting is an art, a creative work that is honed from individual's creative abilities. These writers, however, acknowledge that guidelines are needed in this art because a play, unlike other creative works is not an end in itself, it initiates the theatre process and requires a director to bring it to life on stage. It is the performativity expectations of a play that makes it imperative for a playwright to pay attention to the requirements of a stage performance. This article demonstrates how 'linking characters' contribute to the purpose and effectiveness of plays in performance. It is expected to serve as reference for playwriting students and all others who desire to write plays, especially for African audiences.

Playwrights just like their counterparts; shipwrights, wheelwrights, millwrights and wainwrights are craftsmen who either build or create things by employing skills, experiences and various techniques to master their specific craft. Distinctively, playwrights develop stories into play scripts. Often playwrights have protracted stories. It becomes an arduous challenge as the writer strives to plot, edit and re-edit to eliminate or retain significant components of their story to get to a meaningful end. This sometimes create gaps that might distort the comprehension of the play. To counteract this difficulty and make their plays intelligible, writers use various techniques to fill gaps in their plays. These gaps have been effectively filled by playwrights by what I have labelled, the 'linking character.'

A linking character is a character a playwright uses to fill gaps in a play and establishes rapport between performers and audience. They are sometimes the lone characters presenting monologues as prologues and epilogues in plays. In African drama, these characters are a lot of times used in plays that replicate the indigenous story telling form which is common in many parts of Africa as story tellers or narrators. African playwrights who use this form prudently recognise the need to present a theatre form their own people can identify with and for a better appreciation and sustainability of contemporary live theatre. Etherton (1982) suggests that 'in search for appropriate form

a writer takes account of the social milieu in which the performance will take place and specific performance traditions and particular actor-audience relationships' (p. 57). African playwrights predominantly present a form of theatre that encourages audience interaction in which the linking character is most useful.

Many African Playwrights label linking characters with varied names and utilize them for various purposes. But what do linking characters actually contribute to the plays and the audience? For pragmatic discussion I have selected eight African plays in which 'linking characters' have been used potently. They are: Aidoo's *Anowa*, Asare's *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*, Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa,* Soyinka's *The Trials of Bro Jero*, deGraft's *Through a Film Darkly*, Abdallah's *The Witch of Mopti* and Brew's *Murder of The Surgical Bone*. The linking characters in these plays go by the following names: The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper, Ananse, Narrator, Story Teller, Jero, Feyinka, Story-Tellers (a group the author calls Abibigromma) and Narrator (in multiple roles) respectively.

Methodology

The article principally analyses texts in selected plays in a bid to identify the various roles of linking characters. As media theorist McKee indicates, researchers use textual analysis when they seek understanding of people and their relation to their world (Mckee 2003). In this context, characters in relation to the world of the play. McKee posits that researchers who use textual analysis make 'educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text' (2003, p. 2). In this research the author analyses and makes meaning of selected play texts and particularly identifies the specific roles of linking characters in those plays. This was achieved by generating specific themes. The author acknowledges that 'There is no such thing as a single, 'correct' interpretation of any text. There are large numbers of possible interpretations, some of which will be more likely than others in particular circumstances' (McKee, 2003, p. 4). This article is developed with this understanding of inconclusiveness, and thus the author is analysing the selected text per her own interpretation supported by literature available. Purposive sampling method was employed in selecting the plays analysed. 'Purposive sampling allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested' (Silverman, 2005, p. 129). This selection approach was used because the purpose of the research was to identify linking characters and their roles in plays. It was essential to select plays in which the authors have distinctly used linking characters effectively to aid the discussions.

Unravelling the details of the playwright's story

Playwrights, most of the time, create stories from varied sources. These include their observation, perspective, inclination and as indicated by Currie (2012), their point of view; hence the need to convey the message clearly for prospective directors' interpretation and audience appreciation. Osofisan (2001) seems to confirm the imitation of what is familiar to a writer as he establishes that:

> Yoruba dramatist instinctively design their plays along the format of the performances that are so abundant in their own community-that is, as ceremonies modelled after animist festival theatres-and also that the characters they create for their stage are conceived after the kind of composite actors the playwrights are familiar with within their environment (p. 183).

Playwrights create characters to transmit their messages to audiences; characters who perform the actions and speak the dialogue. 'At the centre of the drama are its characters and the stories they tell through their actions. … The characters who appear on stage have remarkable qualities that may draw us to them' (Arnold, 2001, p. 263). Although this fact cannot be disputed, the writer is also expected to make available certain peculiarities about the world of any play to aid audience with better understanding of the actions of the characters and their dialogue. Wilson (1998) suggests that:

> Even when we identify closely with the characters or situation in a play, in drama from the past there is much that we cannot understand unless we are familiar with the history, culture, psychology, and philosophy of the period when it was created. This is because there is a close connection between any art form and the society in which it is produced (p. 45).

The audience at a performance most of the times do not have the opportunity to ask questions or seek clarifications on portions of the play they could not understand. It is imperative for the playwright to give enough information so they can understand the message without much difficulty. Cogen (2015) indicates that messages might be misconstrued when the approach to deliver it is inappropriate. Communication takes place only when the raconteur effectively conveys a message to attentive listeners. The ill-informed stands the risk of misinterpretation; the partially-informed stands the risk of misapprehension and non-informed stands the danger of complete ignorance. But the well-informed has experienced effective communication. Unlike other art forms and literature, communication in a play script incorporate various forms of communication, including, verbal, non-verbal, gestures, movements, facial expressions among others. This is because the play is meant to be read, understood, interpreted rightly and performed for audiences to understand the playwright's intent.

Considering the discussion thus far, staging time sometimes constraint playwrights who desire to give enough information for better understanding of their plays. Though there is no fixed set time for a play, 'due to growth in television generation ... the ideal duration for any play is one and a half hours' (Osofisan, 2001, p. 186). This time limitation puts extra stress on contemporary playwrights to further compress their stories. Cassady explains that 'an hour onstage may represent any amount of actual time, although more time usually is represented as having passed than the actual two hours or so it takes to present a play. Dialogue is usually free of the extraneous and distracting details that are common in ordinary conversation' (1997, p. 31). Since it is not possible to enact entire lifetime on stage within a specified dramatic period and yet desirable to provide enough information for a better understanding of a play, there is the need for a playwright to pay attention to play economy.

> Economy relates to one's skill in eliminating or consolidating characters, events, locales, and words in the service of compression. … Events that are integral to the story but cannot be shown within the devised setting can simply be reported. …The effects of economy and compression are both financial and aesthetic (Cohen, 2000, p. 394).

The playwright in plotting, therefore, must select the important milestones that will eventually become the story of his play. But how can the playwright provide other important facts or information that will help the audience understand the play better but cannot be part of the action due to staging time limitations? It is the need to provide enough information within a limited dramatic time that makes it imperative for playwrights to design techniques to fill in gaps in their stories. This is when a 'linking character' becomes handy.

Typical roles of the 'linking character' with special regard to their purposes and effectiveness

A play must be exciting, suspenseful, thought provoking, and most especially, conclude meaningfully. As much as such dynamics and universal appeals are essential, consideration for a form of theatre that will be appealing to the nature of the specific target audience cannot be ruled out. In the ensuing discussions I assess the role of the linking character in the selected plays with special regards to their purpose, effectiveness and their overall contributions to the plays.

Describes geographical and physical environment of the play

Without refuting the notion that set design, properties and costumes determine where and when an action takes place, a better understanding of a play sometimes require further explanation, especially if the setting is quite alien to anticipated audience. Most

of the time information about locale and set is part of stage directions and available to the director and technical director who interpret them to their personal understanding. If the writer acknowledges the fact that localities could appear so similar that his purpose and meaning could be distorted, he might highlight his locale to the audience for clarity and emphasis. For instance, if the playwright's intention is to project a beautiful industrial city that is plagued with lung disease because of pollution, the description of the locale could be verbally articulated to aid understanding. Cassady (1997, p. 190) affirms that: 'The exposition, or background necessary to understanding the play, comes largely through the dialogue.' Such elucidation of world of a play by a writer will help avoid misinterpretations.

Aidoo (1969) possibly aware of this need uses her linking characters; 'The Man and The Woman', who are together referred to as; 'The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper' in *Anowa*, to provide lots of information on the geographical and physical environment in the prologue before the main action of the play begins. The opening lines of Old Man reads:

> Here is the state of Abura, which must surely be one of the best pieces of land Odomankoma, our creator, has given to man. … Behind us to the south, Aburabura our beautiful lonely mountain sits with her neck to the skies… In the south, Nana Bosompo, the ocean roars on, Lord of Tuesdays (p. 23).

This description indicates that the land is fertile, geographically well located and expected to yield good harvest for the inhabitants. Its proximity to the sea also suggests that the men are fishermen and their women fishmongers. This probably explains why Kofi Ako comes on stage in 'work clothes carrying a fish trap and a bundle of baits' (p. 29). The gossip about Anowa also takes place among the fish mongers as reported by young girl in the play. 'Girl: Listen, they were saying at the fish-kilns that she went and stared at Takoa's baby so hard that the boy is having convulsion' (p. 73). In phase one, Aidoo, states in the stage direction that the actions in phases one and three take place in Yebi and the big house at Oguaa respectively. As mentioned earlier, this information might only benefit readers or a directors who might interpret them to their personal understanding. To clarify the specific location, Aidoo provides Old man with a line in phase one after Anowa leaves home regardless her parents' protest: 'Old man: Perhaps it is good for them that they have left Yebi to go and try to make their lives somewhere else' (p. 41). This line offers the audience the opportunity to be acquainted with the exact suburb of Abura State the action takes place. In *The Witch of Mopti* Togbi (a member of the story-telling team), describes the location of the action to the audience, 'Mopti is an old-walled city far away on the banks of the river Niger' (Abdallah 1989, p. 7). Other

members of the team add to the setting by providing information on the occupation of the inhabitants.

Rotimi (1969), in *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, also uses his linking character, the narrator, to reveal the locale of the play: 'Narrator: The place is the land of Kutuje' (p. 1). Summarily, in *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*, Ananse, the linking character, announces his destination which becomes the location for the action as 'Dim-Nyim Lira'; the land of idiots (Asare, 2006, p. 3). Both Rotimi and Asare use imaginary locations, presumably concocted in line with the message in the play. All the aforementioned information about locations might aid the understanding of the play by a universal audience to whom the culture portrayed is alien (Wilson, 1998).

Provides background information to a play

If communication between a playwright/performer will be effective, enough background information should be given to the audience. Archer (1960) stresses the need for a playwright to flashback and put audiences in possession of antecedent circumstances if he plunges straight into the crisis in an attempt to seize their attention firmly from the start (p. 58). Cassady also recommends that 'If the framework is alien … more has to be explained. If it takes place in a different culture, a distant time, or in an entirely different world, the playwright has to make sure the audience knows everything about that 'universe' that has bearing on the action' (1997, p. 160). Aside the description of the locale and set, background information may include antecedent to the dramatic action. In *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, Rotimi (1979) provides a lot of background information in the prologue which is presented by his linking character; the narrator. He explains that a baby was born to King Adetusa and his wife Ojuola of Kutuje. As custom demanded of all first born males, the child is taken to the shrine of Ogun for blessing and divination where he was ill-destined and taken to the woods to die. The narrator again informs the audience that after the death of Adetusa, the people of Ikolu attacked Kutuje and killed many until Odewale came to their rescue (pp. 1-5). The information given by the linking character here aids the audience to understand later developments in the story when Odewale is revealed as the ill-destined child. In *The Witch of Mopti*, the story tellers provide a lot of background information to the play. They talk about a town that has its good and ugly sides, rich and lazy people, 'warriors of Mopti who will kill even a citizen of Mopti' and 'rulers who have sworn to look after the interest of the poor, the sick, the children ...' (p. 8). All this information provide the audience with good understanding of subsequence scenes and actions and also arouse interest.

Provide information about the characters

The nature of a character in a play is often deduced from their action and reaction to given circumstances. Not necessary pre-empting the nature of a character, some information will help the audience to appreciate why characters behave the way they do. In *The Trials of Bro Jero*, Jero introduces himself:

> I am a prophet. A prophet by birth and by inclination. … I think my parents found that I was born with rather thick and long hair. It was said to come right down to my eyes and down to my neck. For them, this was a certain sign that I was born a natural prophet … You must admit that I am rather good looking … I am still single … (Soyinka, 1964, p. 9).

Jero also gives information about the other characters exclusively to the audience as they appear on stage.

> They begin to arrive. As usual in the same order. This one who always comes earliest, I have prophesied that he will be made a chief in his home town. … One of my most faithful adherents - unfortunately, he can only be present at weekends - firmly believes that he is going to be the first Prime Minister of the new Mid-North-East State- when it is created. …The next to arrive is my most faithful penitent. She wants children, so she is quite a sad case … she is always the one to tell me that my mind is not on the service (Soyinka, 1964, pp. 24-25).

He also gives information about his premeditated victim. 'He is a member of the Federal house, a back-bencher but one eye on a ministerial post. Comes here every day to rehearse his speeches. But he never makes them. Too sacred' (p. 39). Jero's information about himself and that of his members help the audience to understand why the others do not recognise his cunning ways and still follow him. In *Through a Film Darkly*, Feyinka introduces himself and other characters.

'Feyinka: My name Is Feyinka My English name, as you may put it, is Henry Wilson. …My wife is in the play, Janet is her name… there's a chap in this play who can't help insulting her' (p. 4). Then he continues to give information about the major characters as well as the setting of the play: 'But remember that this play is about young Ghanaians, some of them educated in England (as indeed you know by now), all of them articulate and intelligent, and living in Ghana that is changing so rapidly in so many ways physical and psychological... (DeGraft, 1970, p. 18).

Likewise, in *Murder of the Surgical Bone*, the narrator gives information about Kofi Abebrese and Amanda before they appear on stage. 'Perhaps I should tell you what

happened to little Kofi. The boy grew up in Auntie Comfort's home and became a lawyer, a good profession ah? He got married to a wonderful woman ... As I was saying, Kofi Abebrese got married to Amanda' (Brew, 2010, p. 6). The audience at this point expect to see a lawyer and the woman described as wonderful. In *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, the narrator gives information about the diviner. 'Baba Fakunle, oldest and most knowing of all Ifa priests in this world, it is you I greet' (p. 2). All the information about these characters help audiences to understand their relationship with other characters from the start of the play through to the end. For instance, Kofi had to accept Auntie Comfort's appeal to admit his father in his home because she took care of him when his father was jailed after killing his mother at the tender age of six, an information given earlier by the narrator. Similarly, the description of Baba Fakunle justifies the accuracy of his divination about Odewale. Abdallah's story-tellers provide vivid description of The King of Mopti before his first appearance on stage.

NII KWEI:

> Ei! This new King of Mopti! Hmmm! They say he is handsome like a gazelle. They say he has the courage of a lion, the wisdom of an elephant, the strength of a bull ... both up here (He flexes his muscles) and down there! (Indicates his genitals). And they say he has the stubbornness of a mule (Abdallah, 1989, p. 10).

The women also mention his shiny dark complexion and sexy eyes (p. 11). These descriptions create suspense as the audience wait to see the main character described with such favourable adjectives. It is however, well noting that such detailed character description in a play restricts a director's selection of actors. For instance, when the play was directed at the University of Education, Winneba in 2007, the director had to delete the stated complexion because she could not find an actor who suits all the descriptions stated in the script.

Establishes rapport with the audience

Communication through drama is often more effective in Africa if some form of acquaintance is established between the performer and the audience. Wilson (1998) affirms that 'The audience is an indispensable element in the theatre because theatre occurs only when spectators are present to interact with the performers and identify with the characters being presented on stage' (p. 11). If theatre is an interface that involves the performer and audiences, and if indeed audiences attend theatre events with some anticipation, then the initiator of the theatre process must envisage the audience of his artistry and find appropriate form of communication. Indigenous African audiences for whom the playwrights write for, are not passive; they applaud,

laugh, cry, pass comments, hoot and yell at performers if the performance moves them so. They register their disapproval of a boring performance by giggling, scratching of feet and sarcastic applause.

Just like their contemporaries elsewhere, the search for form of presentation for a lot of African playwright often does not go beyond one that is common to them and their people. They consider the nature of their immediate audience; the African, in their choice of form for their works. Motivated by participatory mode of indigenous entertainment, a lot of African playwrights tend to use the indigenous story telling form which is participatory in nature for modern theatre presentations, targeting contemporary audiences. In the indigenous form, though the story is told by one person who sometimes enacts scenes, other members of the audience can interrupt with songs, comments and further enactments. Following this form, a presentational style is a popular choice for many African Playwrights, as it gives the performers the ability to interact with the audience without the vile obstruction of the fourth wall.

In the foreword to *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Sutherland (1975) establishes that though story-telling is usually a domestic activity in Ghana; there are in existence some specialist groups who have given it a full theatrical expression with established conventions. She further confirms it is this system of traditional theatre which she had developed and classified *Anansegoro* (v). Also in the preface to *The Trial of Mallam Ilya and Other Plays* Abdallah (1987) acknowledges that his first play, *The Alien King*, is built on the framework of traditional story-telling and the technique of Africa's revered Griots.

Asare (2006), in his play *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*, a kind of satiric comedy, uses Ananse, the main character as a linking character to interact with the audience; most likely in accordance with the interactive nature of the African audience. When the play commences, Ananse rises from his seat in the centre of the auditorium and interacts with the audience before he goes on stage.

> Ananse: Well, ladies and gentlemen … I suppose we are all here to watch this play … 'Ananse in the land of Idiots' … Anyway folks, I think I should first introduce myself and define my role here, tonight, so it won't seem I'm hoisting myself on such an august gathering (p. 1).

In this play Ananse is the only stranger in the land of Idiots. As the whole village is against him he finds solace in the audience, with whom he shares his thoughts, fears struggles, and success. Before the first movement ends he solicits the support of the audience:

> Now, you folks, is that all you can do? Sitting tight over there and staring at me as if I was a mad man? Can't you see I need inspiration? Yes, I need inspiration from you … to create … to scheme … to plan strategies. You must inspire me. Here then, chant for me! Kweku Ananse, Kweku Ananse Osee yiee!
>
> Chorus/Audience Respond: Yiee ……Yiee! (p. 20).

Acquaintance between him and the audience is well established here. Again, at the opening of the second movement Akpala, who is supposed to keep watch over Ananse is sleeping and snoring. After observing him for a while Ananse asks the audience rhetorical questions. 'How can such a sleepy scarecrow embody the watchful vigilance of an empire? Tell me somebody. What stops me from picking my things and sneaking off now?' (p. 22). Again, at the point when Sodzisa heard him speak in his usual nasal voice which nearly revealed his real identity as Ananse and not Pootagyiri as he has impersonated, he expresses his fears to the audience: 'That was close, I tell you. A close shave indeed! But keep your okro mouths shut. There are still more knots to untie' (p. 56). Towards the end of the play when Ananse finally succeeds in his manoeuvres, he announces his victory to the audience. 'Now you see, folks? What did I tell you? Now I've won myself chiefdom, a wife, wealth unlimited and even three boats to carry everything to safety' (p. 52). Ananse kept his word from the beginning to be in touch with the audience who he had cautioned to remain his confidants. His constant contact with the audience additionally upholds the comic aura of the play.

In *Through a film Darkly*, Feyinka, one of the characters in the play doubles as Addo's neighbour and a sort of narrator. His first appearance is after the false start. He calls for audience attention. 'Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but that was a false start-unfortunate' (DeGraft, 1970, p. 2). And before he retires after his prolonged acquaintance with the audience, he demands an applause from them. Although *Through a film Darkly* is a tragedy, DeGraft manages to use the linking character to diminish emotional intensity to relax the audience at the end of the play with the following dialogue:

> Well, there we are, ladies and gentlemen. As I said at the beginning, this is a play. And that means John is not dead - it's been all make-believe, and you will be seeing all the actors in a moment. First, however, let me thank you for being so good to us. We hope we have been able to give you something to think about. Thank you. (Turning to backstage) Hullo, fellows: come and meet the audience (p. 60).

Similarly, the narrator in Brew's *Murder of the Surgical Bone* addresses the audience and asks their views on the verdict of the judge and also gives some background information

about the play (p. 5). Also, Jero in Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* interacts with the audience and announces his mission in the following lines: 'However, my whole purpose in coming here is to show you one rather eventful day in my life, a day when I thought for a moment that the curse of my old master was about to be fulfilled. It shook me quiet a bit, but … the Lord protects his own …' (p. 10).

In Osofisan's (2001) *Once Upon Four Robbers*, the audience become an integral part in the resolution of the play when they are requested to give a verdict as to whether the robbers should be executed or freed. In fact their ruling is what is carried out. He explained that he chose to go further with the audience dynamism, by building it into the very structure of the plot, so that most times the ending of his plays are determined by the audience. According to him this procedure is part of his strategy of enhancing the spectator's freedom (pp. 199-200). Abdallah uses Abibigroma as story-tellers in *The Witch of Mopti* as a link between the story and the audience. The start with a conversation with the audience, gives them a lot of background information and continue to liaise with them as the story progresses. All the aforementioned interaction between the linking characters and the audience are calculated to establish good liaison and audience participation as well as offer a better understanding and appreciation of the plays.

Creates the mood and atmosphere

Mood is 'a state of mind in which one's feeling, emotion, or range of sensibility has ascendancy' (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 312). The mood in a play is established in part by the set, sound effects and lights, but the mood can also be established through dialogue. This can be achieved by using the linking character. In *The Gods Are Not To Blame* the mood of the play is established the moment the play commences. The Narrator's first line reads: 'The struggles of man begin at birth. It is meet then that our play begins with the birth of a child' (p. 1). Then when the baby is brought to the shrine for prognosis the narrator enquires:

Narrator:	…what it is that the boy has brought as mission from the gods to carry out out on earth.
Baba Fakunle:	This boy, he will kill his own father and then marry his mother!
Narrator:	Bad word! Mother weeps, Father weeps. The future is unhappy, but to resign oneself to it is to be crippled fast. Man must struggle. The bad future must not happen. The only way to stop it is to kill, kill the unlucky messenger of the gods, kill the boy (p. 3).

The concept of struggle against destiny is well established in the opening scene. Wetmore (2001) posits that this opening dialogue 'introduces the Greek idea of life being a struggle that begins at birth and does not end until death' (p. 105). His view is deduced from analysis of the play as an adaptation of the Greek classic, *King Oepidus*. Certainly this is not just an idea of the Greeks. In many cultures, (including the one in which this play is established) it is believed that what the gods have destined cannot be reversed. The foreboding at the beginning of the play leads audience to tragic end of the hero, Odewale.

In The Trials of Bro Jero, Jero establishes the mood at the start of the play 'And it was a sad day indeed when I woke up one morning and the first thing to meet my eyes was a daughter of Eve. You may compare that feeling with waking up and finding a vulture crouched on your bedpost' (p. 11). Early on, the Old Prophet had cursed that the Daughters of Eve will bring ruin down on Jero's head (p. 11). Vultures are birds that feed on carcasses. Presumably, the analogy is deduced from the danger of his ruin and the vulture which is ready to devour his cadaver. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* uses a similar opening; 'Oh life is a struggle, Oh life is a pain; Oh life is a struggle, Oh life is a pain, In this world' (p. 1). In the three plays, the cited lines create the atmosphere that shapes the state of mind and expectation of audiences.

Announces time lapse

The different segments in plays to signify passage of time are demarcated by scenes, acts, movements or phases as apposite for a writer's technique. These partitions are mostly indicated by the use of stage curtains or black-outs. Most of the time it takes the audience a while to imagine how much time has lapsed, especially when major part of the action in the time lapse is not part of the action of the play. In Brew's *Murder of the Surgical Bone*, the narrator fills in a long lapse of time from the time Kofi Abebrese was six years to his wedding which is scantly re-enacted. 'Perhaps I should tell you what happened to little Kofi. The boy grew up in Auntie Comfort's home and became a lawyer, a good profession ah?' (p. 6). He also announces that the action in the play begins fourteen years after the wedding ceremony that is re-enacted (p. 8). In the play *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, the narrator announces that two years after the birth of the first child (who was divined evil), a second son was born. He also announces that the action in the play takes place thirty two years after the birth of the ill destined child, Odewale (p. 4). In the same way, the Old man in *Anowa* announces: 'But here is Anowa, and also Kofi Ako. It is now a little less than thirty years when the Lords of our houses signed that piece of paper- the bond of 1844 they call it' (Aidoo, p. 26). Here, using the linking character to indicate time lapse helps the audience to quickly recognize the characters as time lapse is quiet vast. This bridging also replaces regular scene changes

and appropriately moderate black outs.

Provides intermission services

In any case the linking character could still be used to engage audiences with exciting dialogue, gimmicks and attention-gabblers when scene change becomes inevitable. For instance, in *Anowa* the second and third phases of the play take place on the highway and The Big House at Oguaa respectively. The description of the latter set reads:

> … The furniture here is either consciously foreign or else opulent. There are beautiful skins lying on the richly carpeted floor. Other articles include a giant sideboard on which are standing huge decanters, with or without spirit, and big decorative plates. In the centre is a fireplace and above it, a picture of Queen Victoria unamused. To the left of the Queen is KOFI AKO himself, and, to the right, a large painting of the crow, the totem bird of the Nsona clan. In the centre of the room is a gilded chair with rich-looking cushions, and in front of it, a leopard skin. ... (p. 68).

In the absence of sophisticated technical theatre facilities such as a revolving stage, arranging this set, and most likely without stage lights might take a while and audiences might get agitated. 'The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-Pepper' is used to fill in the gap as they give information about the acquired wealth of the couple. Intermissions can, therefore, be used to retain audience's attention whilst scene changes are going on. However, it is well noting that in creating intermissions it is crucial for the playwright to pay attention to the selection of words and phrases that moulds the expressions of the linking character in order to capture and uphold the concentration of the audience.

Forebodes future calamities

Archer (1960) expresses the need to recapitulate as he explains: 'a good first act should never end in a blank wall. There should always be a window in it, with at least a glimpse of something attractive beyond' (p. 120). Giving hints as to what audience must expect create suspense. As suggested by Archer, glimpses of something attractive (not necessary appealing or the commonplace) kindles audience imagination and predictions. Foreknowledge especially in tragedies, avoids shock and helps audience to accept the resolution of the playwright; as the adage goes 'to be forewarned is to be forearmed.' This is eminent in some of the selected plays.

In *Anowa*, the Old Woman hints: 'And the gods will surely punish Abena Badua for refusing to let a born priestess dance! ' (p. 26). The Old Man also gives clues of possible disaster: 'Those who have observed have remarked that every house is ruined where they take in slaves' (p. 62). Both pointers signal an imminent calamity to the audience.

Correspondingly, the telltale signs given by Feyinka in *Through a Film Darkly* also predict a catastrophe:

> When you get married, u'll realize that the surest way to destroy your marriage is to allow the facts of your marriage to come to light- especially the facts without your marriage. It's a very easy step from that to-suicide! Oh yes these facts-premarital, extra marital, post marital, what will you-although God knows it's entirely outside our power which of them will come to light where and when (p. 4).

At the end of the play audience's imagination and predictions calculated from these allusions might be accurate giving them some inner satisfaction probably mixed with sympathy for the fated mortals.

Comments on previous action, announces the next

Annotations by linking characters also intensify or minimise the intensity of the previous action and occasionally direct the attention of the audience to the writers thinking and point of view. On the other hand clues are given to stimulate the audience's appetite to witness the ensuing action or how a knot will be untied. Ananse, in *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*, comments on his own action of tying an overwhelming knot at the end of the first movement as he announces his next action which will obviously be untying of the knot: 'Look what I've got myself into! That was a near disaster, I tell you. I'd have been asking my way around ancestral paths by now…. I shall accomplish this task, go ahead to earn myself honour, recognition and authority here' (p. 20). This is an inner feeling Ananse expresses to the audience after spinning his own web and getting trapped in it. But can Ananse really succeed? Ananse's declarations are most likely to arouse curiosity, generate interest and intensify suspense in the audience. Also at the end of phase one in Anowa, the Old Man comments:

> My fellow townsmen. Have you heard what Kofi and Anowa are doing now? They say he is buying men and women as though they were only worth each a handful of the sands on the shore. Ei, Anowa and Kofi. Were those not the same who left Yebi like a pair of unwanted strangers? (p. 61).

In quite a digression, the old man's comment is on a previous action which is not part of the action in the play; in this sense a very important gap between the period of Kofi Ako and Anowa's struggle and prosperity is filled by that declaration. It is clear that such comments on previous actions give the audience a better insight into what they have already witnessed. A member of Abibigoromma does this intermission in *The Witch of Mopti*.

TOGBI: By daybreak, the news was all over the land. The King of Mopti is impotent! According to the laws and tradition of Mopti, however, no man with any form of physical disability is allowed to sit upon the stool of Mopti. The young king was in great danger of being destooled. But he was determined not to lie down and play dead ... He beat the gong-gong and sent messengers far and wide. Until his court was filled with the greatest magicians, Witches, Wizards and Medicine men and women from every corner of the black land (p. 23).

Reports offstage actions

In Ancient Greek Theatre, horrible and frightening scenes did not take place on stage; they were only reported. This convention is employed in a lot of African plays. In *Murder of the Surgical Bone* the death of Kwame Abebrese is reported thus 'Neighbour: (Shakes his head) He is gone. Kwame Abebrese is dead … hmmm! But he gave me a task to perform. I must help bring Amanda back. It is the wish of a dying man, I will fulfil it' (p. 144). Likewise in *Anowa*, the heart-rending end of Anowa and Kofi Ako is reported. 'Old woman: Puei, puei, puei! This is the type of happening out of which we get stories and legends. Yebi, I wish you due. Kofi Ako shoots himself and Anowa drowns herself! This is too much' (p. 88). Also in *Through a Film Darkly*, John's suicide and death are reported by Adamu.

ADAMU: Sir - sir! (Pointing to the bedroom.) Mr. John ... !
SEWAH: (in alarm.) What is it, Adamu?
ADAMU: Mr. John ... in the bathroom. (With a cry, Sewah leaps past him into the bedroom.)
ADDO: Come on, can't you speak?
ADAMU: Mr. John ... Mr. John ... he's lying on the floor, bleeding.
ADDO: What!
ADAMU: Yes, sir, he's bleeding ... on the floor ... (Touching wrist repeatedly.) ... razor blade ...
OFORI: Good heavens!
ADDO: You mean he ... he ...
OFORI: Suicide? But why? Why? (deGraft, p. 60).

These reports save the playwright the trouble of creating scenes for these actions and also saves the audience the trauma of witnessing bloody and disgusting scenes.

Stimulates audience to sympathise with hero/heroine

Additionally, the selection of words and the manner in which a message is delivered could draw sympathy from the audience or otherwise as the writer desires. In *Anowa*, the Old Woman who reports the death of the couple draws sympathy for Kofi Ako: 'O Kofi! Some say he lost his manhood because he was not born with much to begin with; that he had been a sickly infant and there always was only a hollow in him where a man's strength should be' (p. 88). Old Man also draws sympathy for Anowa when Old Woman blames her for Kofi Ako's predicament in the ensuing dialogue:

> Old Woman: Was it not that Anowa who made him shoot himself?
>
> Old man: Perhaps … It is men who make men mad. Who knows if Anowa would have been a better woman, a better person if we had not been what we are. … She is true to herself. She refused to come back here to Yebi, to our gossiping and our judgements (p. 89).

Although there are insinuations that Kofi Ako might have used his manhood to acquire wealth, the Old Woman's words which indicates that he had birth defects exonerates him. Anowa is also vindicated as Old Man blame gossips (the society) represented as The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-Pepper for the catastrophe.

Augments the intensity of the action

The linking character sometimes aggravates the intensity of the action by what they do and say. Towards the last scene in *Murder of the Surgical Bone*, Amanda comes home to meet her husband ragging with a gun in hand which he points at her. Sensing danger, she runs out of the house. The linking character as Narrator/Neighbour, then comments to the audience:

> (Rushing in) Ah, ah, ah, ah, aah! (Shakes his head.) Terrible, terrible! You see I wanted to intervene in that whirl, but in this play I only do what the playwright asks me to. I don't know why she didn't mandate me to stop Kofi Abebrese from going that far. That was too close. (Pause) What if he had accidentally pulled the trigger? It would have been disastrous, disastrous! And history, would have repeated itself. (Pause) What should I do now?' (p. 65).

In *Murder of the Surgical Bone*, the complications in the play develop from Kwame Abebrese's crime of killing Kofi's mother with a gun when he was six years old. The linking character links Kofi Abebrese's action to his history to increase the risk and intensity of Kofi's action.

Gives insight into the purposes of theatre

There are a lot of people who patronise theatre because of hilarity. However, Osofisan (2001) posits that '… it is only the dim-witted or brainwashed artist who is content with merely to entertain, to play the clown. …Literature must be used to play its role in the advancement of our society, in the urgent struggle against neo-colonialism and the insidious spread of fascism' (p. 84). It is therefore worthwhile educating audiences about other functions of theatre aside the entertainment value. Abdallah, in *The Witch of Mopti*, subtlety provide information on the nature of the performing arts, which he illumes in Abibigoromma.

> ABOTSI: Some think we do concert.
>
> NII SAI: Some think we are just jokers.
>
> TOGBI: Some say we are dondologists.
>
> OSABUTEY: Some even say we do drama and play all kinds of musical instruments.
>
> NII KWEI: But, the truth of the matter is ...
>
> ALL: We do all these and more (p. 5).

DeGraft (1970) gives a more insight into the purposes of theatre in *Through a Film Darkly* using Feyinka who doubles as a storyteller and Addo's Neighbour:

> … Yes that is theatre … No milk and honey, but cerebral entertainment-feeling laced with thought, tears and laughter provoked by thought, a view of life that makes you sit up as if from a long sleep, so you see yourself for what you are-shabby and noble, cowardly and full of courage, a cheat a saint… That is the theatre: makes you think and feel; and everything that helps to achieve this in the theatre is grit to the producer's mill (p. 3).

Theatre critics are also mentioned in this play. Wilson (1998) defines a critic loosely as 'a knowledgeable and highly sensitive member of audience who observes theatre and then analyses and comments on it' (67). DeGraft (1970) is very sceptical about theatre critics and expresses his disgust using Feyinka:

> …Actually if I don't know about the theatre and plays, I should label this one 'a well-made play' and proceed straight away to damn it as a hopeless piece of drama. … I'm not here to give you lecture; but I think it's time someone stuck a hot nail into this bloated balloon of pseudo-intellectualism which goes by the name of theatre criticism … (He makes a jab with his forefinger and follows it

with a lout 'Pissssh!') Nothing but gas! (p. 17).

Theatre critics over the world have sometimes been responsible for the success or otherwise of a written script or its production. Conceivably, it is for this reason that the playwright cautions the audience to make their own judgements of the play as against that of theatre critics. He uses the linking character, who steps out of the main action in the play to give this information to the audience.

Provides voiceover for mime

Clarifications sometimes become necessary when a play makes use of mime. A performer of mime should be versatile enough for the audience to interpret the actions. Some playwrights recognise that plays are not always performed by professional theatre persons and therefore provide extra help for probable amateur performers of mime. In *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, the greater part of the prologue that foretells the time the baby is brought for divination till he is destined, bonded and taken away to the woods are all in mime. The narrator presents a commentary to these actions (pp. 1-5). In *The Witch of Mopti*, the Abibigroma perform mimes whilst others comments on them. 'The group begins to mime - to music - various aspects of the narration from this point onwards' (p. 8). Similar forms of mime and voice over can be found at various sections of the play. This special assistance aids the audience to understand the ensuing events better and subsequently other developments in the play.

Eliminates excessive scenery

Exaggerated scenery could divert audiences' concentration from the meaning of a play. To avoid this, it sometimes becomes necessary to do away with excessive scenery and make use of imaginary sets. The linking character could then be utilized to demarcate and explain the various locations. Here, the experience of Wilder in staging *Our Town* as remarked in his biography by Opasker and Trost is cited:

> In 1938, (Wilder's) play *Our Town* opened in Boston and closed after a week because of poor reviews. Looking for ways to improve the play, Wilder hit upon an idea that he has used in a previous one act play- removed the props and scenery to make the message more clearly and universal. In this way, he reasoned, the audience would not be distracted by props that fixed the play in a specific place and time. When the play reopened in New York City later that year it became a critical and popular success, and Wilder won another Pulitzer Prize (1998, p. 84).

Wilder uses a lot of imaginary sets and employs his linking character, who he calls the Stage Manager, to make distinction between various boundaries in *Our Town*. Aside capturing audience concentration on the message, using non-exaggerated set aids

play productions in Africa, where sophisticated, modern technical theatre facilities are almost non-existence.

Conclusion

The need to present plays that audience can understand and appreciate is paramount to the mission of playwriting; for a play which is not understood by audiences is not worth watching. For effective communication therefore, this article has established that, though the linking characters in the selected plays go by different names, their functions and purposes in linking are similar. They are very instrumental in establishing rapport with audience, describing location and scenes, filling in information vital to the development of plot and performing many other roles in African plays.

It is however recommend that since the cost of production sometimes becomes higher when characters in a play are a multitude, the linking character could be further used to compress the number of characters when assigned multiple roles in a bid to improve the economy of plays. Additionally, African playwrights seldom use episodic plots most likely because of structural difficulties. The linking character could conveniently be used to link acts or scenes and fill in all gaps if a playwright desires to use episodic plot. Hopefully, this article will serve as a mini manual for up-and-coming African playwrights to effectively use the linking character for better economy and communication in their plays.

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About the author

Faustina Brew is a senior lecturer, teaching Playwriting and Drama in Education at the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. Brew was awarded a PhD in Performance Practice (Drama) by the University of Exeter, UK in 2016, prior to which she earned her MFA (Playwriting) degree from the University of Ghana,

Legon in 2006. She has a number of publications including two stage plays and has presented research papers at several international conferences. Her current interests include developing thought-provoking stage plays, playbuilding with children, interplay between child's play and learning and impacts of theatre experiences on audiences.

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