



10-Minute Talks: Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature

By Professor [Ato Quayson FBA](#)

In this talk, Professor Ato Quayson FBA shares insights drawn from his book Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature. He argues that disputatiousness is one of the starting points that connects Greek and postcolonial tragedy.

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7N6nKAsqODQ>



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[00:00:06] The history of tragedy is conventionally traced from the dramatic theatre of fifth-century Athens through its efflorescence on the Jacobean and Elizabethan stage, and then in its shifts into different mediums and genres from the 18th century onwards.

There are different elements of this standard history that are pertinent to an understanding of postcolonial tragedy, and it is not unusual to focus on the various fine adaptations of the Greeks that can be found in postcolonial writing, such as the Nigerian Wole Soyinka's reworking of Euripides's *Bacchae* or the South African Yael Farber's production of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* for Molara – a play that invokes the transitional work of her country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

But there's more to the relationship between the Greeks and postcolonial tragedy. I am focusing my book instead on what I call disputatiousness. And this is one of my starting points for connecting the two. Widowed Clytemnestra and her husband Agamemnon, King Oedipus and the Prophet Tiresias, or Antigone and her uncle Creon, the disputatiousness of Attic tragedy is everywhere in evidence.

While Hegel is correct in turning to Antigone as part of his illustration of the dialectical clash between apparently irreconcilable ethical standpoints, it is Jean-Pierre Vernant who provides the most systematic account of this disputatiousness. In his thesis titled 'Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy', Vernant sees Greek tragedy as a medium for detailing the transitions and entailments that took place between the domains of religion and law that were the central shapers of Greek life in the 5th century.

[00:02:21] Concepts such as *dike* – justice, *nomos* – law and custom, and *ethos* – the fundamental character or spirit of the culture, all come to do double service and are explored by him what emerges as philological anthropology.

When we turn to postcolonial tragedy, what we find is that the most expressive examples display strong forms of disputatiousness regarding the polis of their social imaginaries. Even as there are also transitions and transpositions between law and the sacred in some postcolonial tragedies, the cause of disputatiousness is tied mainly to the struggle against anachronistic or false universals, with colonial modernity, slavery, diaspora, and the predatory and postcolonial nation-state being exemplars of such universals.

While we do find degrees of disputatiousness in the Renaissance and especially in Jacobean and Elizabethan tragedy, it is Shakespeare that – I think – provides us with a second productive rubric for illustrating another key feature of postcolonial tragedy.

I use the term disputatiousness here to refer not just to disputes between characters but also to point out the often-violent processes of historical and social transition that engender such disputes in the first place. Disputatiousness in historical and social transitions as correlative in the unruly affected economies or emotional turmoil that mark the characters' fractured sense of their place in society.

[00:04:22] The Shakespearean tragedy is often almost pure historical disputatiousness, such as Julius Caesar, Coriolanus and Titus Andronicus are not considered among his best and for good reasons.

For it is the addition of an unruly, affected economy and emotional turmoil that places plays such as Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth and Antony and Cleopatra above those of a pure historical disputatiousness. Shakespeare's finest tragedies correlate the unruly affected economy to different modes of argumentation that emerge from changes in the represented historical worlds of the plays.

These include transitions in the political realm, as we find in Hamlet and Macbeth. The unstable requalification of the relations between gender, local governments, imperial rule, and the claims of romantic love, as we find in Antony and Cleopatra and in Othello. And the progressive shifts in the relationship between the king's body as a surrogate of the body politic and the spheres of the natural order, as we find in King Lear and Richard II.

The dimension of an unruly affected economy amplifies the interiority of the characters onstage and renders them ciphers of the changing social and historical realities of which they are a part.

The trope of disputatiousness and historical transitions tied to an unruly affective economy is to be seen as much in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* as in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, C. L. R. James' *The Black Jacobins* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. All of which, along with several others, provide great examples for understanding postcolonial tragedy.

[00:06:45] In addition to the long history of tragic disputatiousness that I trace from the Greeks, I also draw heavily on Aristotle's poetics and the *Nicomachean Ethics* to establish the parameters of suffering and the impediments to flourishing all the good life.

My Aristotelian scaffolding is, however, augmented by a very important concept that I draw from my cultural background. I come from Ghana and in the Akan culture from which I hail, there are certain infractions that are placed under the rubric of "musuo", or harms to the soul, that seem to me analogous to the category of impediments to ethical choice per Aristotle's formulation of such impediments in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere.

The term "musuo" is normally translated into English as taboo but in my reading may also be considered as deep harms that impact simultaneously individuals and the communities of which they are a part. When a trusted person sleeps with a friend's wife, they are "wa di no awu" which may be translated as "he has served, or given him death". In other words, "he has killed him". Such great acts of betrayal are also referred to as "wakum ne sunsum" or "he has killed his soul".

[00:08:24] The killing of someone's "sunsum" – what I'm describing here as harm to the soul – is thought by the Akan to deeply impact upon the victim's emotions, and it causes the affected individuals to themselves suffer a loss of faith in society that will consequently also affect their capacity for making ethically informed choices.

However, “musuo” would – I think – also fall under the general Aristotelian rubric of causative reversals of fortune, not from the view of the alteration of material circumstances – the loss of a job or losing a house – but rather from the immeasurable impact that this might have for the exercise of ethical choice, both at the individual and the communal level.

Because of the perceived poisoning of the sources of generally held beliefs, for the community there arises an attenuation of the shared sense of collective values that helped to shape the personal relations within itself. “One finger dipped in palm oil,” say the Akan, “ends up swallowing all the other fingers of the hand”.

Like sacrilegious taboos – such as murder, stealing sacrifices meant for the ancestors and the gods or having sex in the bush – the Akan also consider such harms to the soul as sometimes requiring acknowledgement and propitiation as a means of repairing the destructive ties of *philia*, both familiar and friendly. The person suffering harm to the soul has not only to undergo personal psychic adjustment but the entire community of *philia* has also to undergo a form of ritual restoration.

[00:10:24] What I want to do derive as a strong emotional effect of harms to the soul from the Akan category of “musuo” seem to me to have implications for interpreting the mechanisms of *hamartia* and *anagnorisis* that you see laid out in Aristotle’s theory of tragedy.

For the Akan might mean temperate, Aristotle’s categories as pertaining to the relationship between knowledge and community since *anagnorisis*, or tragic knowledge, is not always the exclusive purview of the individual tragic protagonist, but in certain circumstances, is co-produced through the interaction of their guilt with a sense of contamination and anxiety of their wider community.

In contrast to Aristotle’s concepts, Akan “musuo” means actions that are deeply personal in the implications for the continuing exercise of ethical choice, as well as collective for the perceived wellbeing of the community at large. The duality I see included in the Akan concept also means that individual actions are always judged to have an automatic social or communal ramification, and that while it is the individual that may experience the reversal of the capacity to act or to make ethically salient choices, the community is not entirely excluded from the existential malaise brought on by the “musuo”. Indeed, there are many examples in Greek tragedy to suggest that the catastrophe that afflicts the hero is best interpreted as the “musuo” in that context.

[00:12:19] Thus we see – for example – the chorus’s reaction to watching Oedipus coming out of Jocasta’s bed chamber with blood streaming down his eyes and learning that he’s a source of the parricide and incest that have contaminated the entire Theban society.

Every reaction of the chorus registers the sense of pollution that is thought to be carried by Oedipus, a *pharmakos* – sacrificial carrier – of which he has become an exemplar. A similar thing can be seen in the Argive chorus’s retrospective report of Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia in Aeschylus’s version. Everything about the description, including the fact that Iphigenia was god so that she could not utter curses upon her father, stick to the idea of “musuo” contained in that terrible scene.

Each element in my theoretical armature is then illustrated through a careful exploration of works by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Tayeb Salih, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, J. M. Coetzee, Samuel Beckett, and also Shakespeare, all of whom feature as individual chapters in the book. I deploy examples from postcolonial literature to help qualify the insights drawn from the Western tradition and vice versa, and also to illustrate the fact that when it comes to understanding tragedy, and indeed suffering in general, everything that has been written on them through humanistic inquiry in every tradition and culture is relevant to the enterprise.