

Title—Of Irony and Empire: Islam, the West, and the Transcultural Invention of Africa

Author—Laura Rice

Year—2007

Categories: Theory, Empire, Irony, Islam, Culture, Colonialism

Place: The World (The West & Africa)

Time: 1830-1960

Argument Synopsis:

Rice's book is focused on the trope of irony and how it was utilized in the imperial period, especially in an African context. She argues that irony as the trope based on dialectical relationships is able to translate the relativity of our epistemologies and opens the ways to new understandings. Specifically, Rice is concerned with social imaginaries, or our ways of making sense of the practices of our societies. She examines the transcultural experience of modernity, both linguistic and material, as it has invented that part of contemporary Africa which includes the largely Muslim countries surrounding the Sahara and the people who inhabit this region. Rice claims that irony provides a way of understanding how competing social imaginaries interacted to create the transcultural inventions of Muslim Africa. She begins with a close look at stable and unstable forms of irony and their connections to empire, before turning to examining the comparative poetics that shape Western and Muslim African social imaginaries. Rice underscores the four traits that build stable irony—intentionality, or the author having a particular audience in mind; slippage, or an overt surface meaning that gives way to a covert, submerged meaning; commonality, or intelligibility based on a set of shared attitudes and expectations; and legitimacy, or the reconstructed, hidden meaning that informs the intellectual footing.

Rice seeks to bridge the gap between North African and Sub-Saharan literature by focusing on all of Muslim Africa which crosses this divide. She highlights how irony emerges in a variety of ways in the encounter between the West and Islam. Rice argues that Europe's imperial nineteenth century was an age of 'stable irony' in which relations between cultures were marked by disdain, superiority, and detachment rather than empathy. She asserts, alongside theorists Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, that unstable irony pushes us towards effective activism. Her collection of essays is focused on the differences in the social imaginaries that emerge between Europe and Africa. She finds that too often, fully justified condemnations of the way women's rights have been handled by a particular nation state in Muslim Africa quickly turns into wholesale condemnations of Muslim culture. She claims that irony remains a necessary corrective to empire. According to Rice, the ends of irony are to offer ethical correctives to the status quo of the powerful to provide new hope in desperate times. Following the work of Fanon, Rice claims that alienation and recognition are related but inverse ways of experiencing and constructing the world, and both are ironic modes. Her book attempts to determine if we, by locating the violence of empire and exploring its attendant ironies, can begin to institute the practice of reciprocal recognition at the level of international relations, national politics, or personal psychology.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Stable irony is built on four traits: intentionality, slippage, commonality, and legitimacy
- Trope of irony is especially well-suited to postcolonial critiques of the relationship between the West and the rest
- The social imaginary is not a set of idea, rather it is what enables throughout making sense of the practices of society