



Original Article

The Philosophy of Dissimilation, Meaninglessness and Isolation in Theatre of the Absurd: Evidence from John Ruganda's Two Plays.

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Drama and theatrical performance remain one of the most effective ways through which life's reality can be experienced, described, perceived and portrayed. Absurd drama has come to be seen as one of the most modern literary movements that have been adopted by African playwrights, Ruganda included. Based on a study of plays by Ugandan playwright John Ruganda, this paper discusses the philosophy of dissimilation, meaninglessness and isolation in theatre of the absurd. The study used Ruganda's two plays, namely *The Floods* and *Shreds of Tenderness*. The various modes through which absurd drama appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities were examined. The study employed descriptive research and used purposive sampling. Data was analysed qualitatively by describing the findings of the study to arrive at inferences and conclusions. In Ruganda's plays, the country is represented as being sick and in dire need of an urgent remedy but no one has the desire to bring in a solution to it. The sickness has not only affected the people as individuals but the nation as a whole. The playwright is by extension pointing to the cause of the sickness affecting the nation as being attributed to bad leadership. Using the lives of main characters, the playwright also demonstrates the senselessness of the human life and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. The characters are portrayed as isolated and lonely individuals whose lives and fate are mere subject of time. The finding of the study is an important contribution to understanding drama and the changing trend in literary criticism in drama.

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INTRODUCTION

Theatre of the absurd was devised in the 1950s and early 1960s by radical European and American dramatists to express their frustrations at the waste and hopelessness of human existence. Operating from philosophical and metaphysical levels, absurd dramatists artistically communicate non-realistic unconventional images that are designed to express the incomprehensible complex world that human beings are condemned to live in. The aesthetics of this theatre abandon logical flow of actions; the plays are plotless, characters lack individuality, language used by the characters is sheer "gibberish," and often the plays contain no believable stories. Ruganda seems to concur with the pioneer absurdist playwrights in his plays. Writing just after the colonial rule, in the East Africa, he portrays what Albert Camus (1957), Nobel Prize winner, in his famous *The Myth of Sisyphus*, says:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, 'is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the home of a promised land to come'. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.

Ruganda seems to agree with Camus in his plays that human life in a way is chaotic, purposeless and never in harmony with the environment. It views the

human condition by abandoning the usual or rational devices and by use of non-realistic form. Conceived in perplexity and spiritual anguish, the theatre of the absurd portrays a series of connected incidents telling a story but a pattern of images presenting people as bewildered beings in an incomprehensible universe (Esslin, 1991).

Peter Nazareth (1980) describes Uganda's playwright John Ruganda as "an invisible teacher who uses drama to comment on disintegration and corruption in the post independent societies" (p. 95). Worth to note playwright's major areas of concern like exploitation, disintegration of moral values, social and political instability, conflicts at domestic and political levels. Ruganda uses ironical humour and grotesque images in the narration of state related violence and absurdity. The figures of the dead bodies and the absurd have thus become common features for the explication of violence by the state. Such scenes seemingly explain the reality in a better way. Speaking of better ways of presenting reality.

Gikandi (1992) notes that "our new [global] situation demands narratives which face up to the task of representing then ambivalences of the post-colonial situation" (p. 380). The resolution to use dead bodies makes a better presentation of the sorry state of affairs of Uganda under Amin's regime. The spectacle of the dead body that Kyeyune fished out of the lake makes him psychologically disturbed and haunts him in his entire life. The image keeps returning to him signalling the 'return of the repressed'. Kyeyune even confesses, "that man still haunts me...I should have brought him to the

land but I was afraid" (*The Floods*, p. 10). The return of the dead body is a way in which the tortured and the murdered 'come back' to haunt those who participated in the killing of innocent people. In the theory of repression, it has been argued that traumatic events leave some sort of indelible fixation in the mind. Terr (1988) comments that "traumatic events create lasting visual images ...burned in visual impressions" (p. 130). The painful memories of violence are brought out through nightmares, dreams or hallucinations.

The physical features of the Major General draw attention to his grotesque image. The major question to be asked is, of what use is the ugly image of the dead body in the play? Through the use of the absurd to represent the ugliness of the situation, Ruganda is expressing assent to the idea that 'black writers should deploy the grotesque to portray the undesirable, the corrupting and the destructive' (Ogude, 1996, p. 82). It is through the ugly that a reading of the nature of violence and the atrocities that mark the period which Ruganda is preoccupied with in the play is made more explicable.

Statement of the Problem

Absurd drama has come to be seen as one of the most modern literary movements. It especially gained popularity in African literature and particularly among East African playwrights. Despite this, there has not been a critical attempt to investigate and examine the aesthetics, nature and role of this genre. Therefore, this paper, discusses the philosophy of dissimulation, meaninglessness and isolation in theatre of the absurd with close reference to John Ruganda's two selected plays: *The Floods* and *Shreds of Tenderness*.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was basically descriptive in nature. Library research on relevant material formed the basis of the study. The research made use of primary and secondary sources of data. Purposive sampling was used to select the texts. In purposive sampling, the researcher chooses the sample based on who/what they think would be appropriate for the study (Deming, 1990). It involved a close and critical reading and literary analysis of John Ruganda's selected texts, namely *Shreds of*

Tenderness and *The Floods*. Secondary sources were obtained through intensive and extensive literature search on theatre of the absurd and related journals and magazines. In addition, libraries such as those of the Kisii University, University of Kabianga, Moi University, Maseno University and University of Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library were used. E-books and online journals from internet are also useful. The two primary texts were analysed using content analysis approach. The texts' structure, symbols, meaning and thematic concerns were subjected to critical analysis. This makes the study descriptive in nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dissimulation of the Society

Dissimulation means that people regard the metamorphic things as normal things. Dissimulation of the society means that many abnormal things have appeared, what is more, these phenomena have been regarded as normal things. Disease, death and hunger are often regarded as the themes to discuss. Evil, crime and violence are often thought to be natural things in the society. When people come across these occasions, they would feel sad and sympathetic for the dead or the patients. But in the theatre of the absurd, people consider it in an indifferent attitude. The mention of the general ward, hospital, walls with blood stains and patients in *The Floods* denote a seriously ill and dying nation.

Those who seems to cause problems in the nation are just killed in style. Murder is not seen as a bad thing but a way of eliminating those who are disturbing. Stella says:

Stella: What I mean is that we should be discreet. Rout out the enemy in style. With elegance... the better to outwit the foreign press.

Odie: Who gives orders here?

Stella: You do, your Excellency.

Odie: Then kill her.

Stella: We could arrange a little accident, my lord. Not a straightforward murder that would

turn a hero, martyr. (Shreds of Tenderness, p. 46).

The country is represented as being sick and in dire need of an urgent remedy but no one has the desire to bring in a solution to it. The sickness has not only affected the people as individuals but the nation as a whole. The playwright is by extension pointing to the cause of the sickness affecting the nation as being attributed to bad leadership. Ruganda centres on violence, depicting in vivid terms the torture the victims experienced “confronting us with the utter destruction and dislocation of the society” (Odile, 2005, p. 63).

Ruganda seems to be highlighting and bringing to our attention to how power drunk leaders have no sense of morality and have driven the nation into destruction. These extreme forms of violence are ‘metaphors for the utter destruction of the society and the nation in general’ (Pribe, 2005, p. 66). The world makes people feel unconcerned and even unmerciful. People no longer believe in any gods who can save or punish them from the heaven. Material life is thought at the first place. As long as a human being gets what he wanted he would not mind the suffering other people are going through. Meanwhile, money is considered the most important thing in the world. Money is the first condition before people do everything. People live in a world where love and mutual assistance are meaningless. There is no love and trust among them.

The Meaninglessness of the Existence of Human Beings

In the theatre of the absurd, playwrights express their true feelings to this world by means of the protagonist whom they have depicted in their plays. A play, in fact, is a mirror which reflects the real phenomena in the society. Odie in *Shreds of Tenderness* finds life meaningless when he struggled to fight for his country only for other people to take all the wealth which they did not work for. He finds it hard to share what he had with the cowards and deserters whose contribution was not felt during the struggle. This makes us to ponder whether those who have amassed wealth really worked for it.

In the theatre of the absurd the playwrights strive to express the senselessness of the human race and the

inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. This makes us to question our existence which is under threat propagated by leaders who are expected to safeguard the sanctity of life. It is absurd that violence in Uganda was institutionalized under Amin, managed by the state and directed against unarmed and largely innocent civilians. The extent of killings saw the enemies of the state and organised groups opposing the coup liquidated in massacres.

The new regime, as Amin’s regime was described after Amin seized power from Obote, engaged in ruthless efforts to eliminate real or potential enemies. Opponents usually disappeared or were summarily killed rather than arrested. In the name of order, the agents of the state promoted violence and disorder (Jorgensen, 1981, p. 296). The groups targeted included Obote’s supporters. Jorgensen further notes that ‘murders and disappearances were the most feared forms of violence under Amin’s regime. The regime denied involvement in the killings yet for a fee, agents of the state could often direct relatives to the locations of the bodies of disappeared (Jorgensen, 1981, p. 313), an indication that the state was aware of and even behind the killings.

There are several reasons why Idi Amin thought a coup was necessary in Uganda. Ironically, one of the key reasons that Amin gave is that the people of Uganda wanted a better leader. It is no doubt that the people of Uganda anticipated a better government after Amin seized power. Large sections of the people in Uganda welcomed the ‘new’ regime favourably because they were disenchanted with Obote’s regime. Amin was regarded as a saviour. But Amin’s rule was “a new era born in repression and bloodshed” (Mamdani, 1984, p. 38). It turned out to be not any better than Obote’s regime. Within a few months of his rule, murders and public executions became normality in Uganda.

In cases where coups occur, the military governments have always promised better governance but end up being more brutal and incompetent than the former civilian governments. Obote’s regime was later preferred to Amin’s because of Amin’s brutality and failure as a leader.

According to Nabudere (1980), “violence in Idi Amin’s era increasingly became the method of solving petty contradictions among the people where the civilian regime resolved the disagreements with detentions and imprisonment” (p. 290). The army was given excessive powers to arrest and to punish offenders.

In an attempt to justify the coup, Amin and his government stated among other reasons that “we all want unity in Uganda, we do not want bloodshed” (Nabudere, 1980, p. 290). The fact that Amin’s regime did not want bloodshed was obviously forgotten as soon as it was pronounced. Instead of ushering in peace and order, the regime promoted violence. Nabudere (1980) asserts that “the coup slowly took away most of the democratic rights acquired by the people in their struggle for self-determination and national independence” (p. 281). Jorgensen (1981) further points out that ‘the regime engaged in ruthless efforts to eliminate real or potential enemies’ (p. 296).

He continues to add that murders and disappearance were the most common forms of torture (Mamdani, 1984, p. 37). What comes to mind is the Nigerian case where the military governments are presented as being more corrupt, inhuman and inefficient than the civilian governments that they overthrow. From the many challenges they had faced, they thought having another different one will make it better but the situation is worsened, where most of the killings were perpetrated by the state security apparatus with Amin claiming complete innocence in the murders.

According to Carolyn S (2008) violence was institutionalized under Amin, managed by the state and directed against unarmed and innocent civilians” (p. 120). The value of human life came to mean little during this time. People ceased to fear death for they saw violence committed against others as something normal. The citizens, filled with fear were left hopeless and without protection from humiliation, molestation and dispossession by Amin’s supporters. The army constituted the rich stratum that not only physically violated innocent people but also looted from the victims of violence. Such is the background from which *Shreds of Tenderness* and *The Floods* are written. Nevertheless, does this warrant Ruganda and other writers to bring to fore these situations in absurd

drama? The atrocities that characterized this regime inspired many writers to write about this period’s events.

According to Imbuga (1999), the inspiration for Ruganda’s concern with corruption and exploitation of humanity in his plays comes from his critical observation of the activities of the government and its agents in Uganda soon after the country’s political independence. Imbuga believes that “Ruganda attributes most of the chaos and upheavals which have characterized his country’s history to callous and selfish political leaders who have no respect for humanity” (Imbuga, 1999, p. 275). Given this contextual basis, Ruganda in the two plays presents what appears to be an account of this regime’s activities through two different accounts: through the state in *The Floods*. While Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the theatre of the absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumption and the form in which these are expressed. They live in a real world, but they do not feel their existence. In fact, they are afraid of their existence, so they would rather put themselves in a confused or unconscious condition even to an extent to imaginary and irresponsible objects. Their talk relieves them since these are repressed feelings which should not be heard directly by the leaders.

Kyeyune: (Addressing some object outside) If I must die, Irresistible One, spare me the lure of your beckon: my feet trudging towards the shore and my eyes glued to the one with the three nails stuck in his skull (The Floods, p. 1).

Only when they do not realize their existence can they feel that they are alive. Most poor people exist and live in endless poverty, and life is terrible to them. If they consider their lives earnestly, their lives are miserable and painful. Only when they forget the reality can they abandon the suffering and feel their existence. But suffering is endless as long as they live, so they have to endure them from cradle to grave (Diao, 2008).

Isolation and Loneliness among People

In the society described by the theatre of the absurd, even amidst people, people live a lonely life. This is because the relationship among people is measured through material and money, they fear being harmed

by their counterparts or even being killed. When they face some dangers and problems, few people come to help them. People who live in this society for a long time will feel lonely and indifferent. Human beings communicate with each other in a cold and detached attitude. Bwogo and Nankya seems not to understand each other because of the poor personal relationship between them.

Nankya: In a way I feel guilty because of him. I don't know about you.

Bwogo: Let's get out here.

Nankya: You killed him.

Bwogo: The Floods are coming (The Floods, p. 47).

Because of this, people gradually have less communication and would rather lock themselves in cages. To Odie, it is even better to be much occupied with the termite experiments to converse with Stella. She has no one to talk to and that state makes her to demand attention from the brother Odie.

Odie: Suit yourself. But there is an appropriate time for everything, do you understand? APPROPRIATE is the word.

Stella: (moving towards the jar threateningly) I am going to smash this jars of yours, if you don't come clean to me. You spend most of your time trying to break down the will of termite. It's driving me crazy. I'll smash it Odie. I'm serious.... I think the malady is back with us. I'll break.... (Shreds of Tenderness, p. 11).

Once more the chain reactions lead to a serious isolation among people. Therefore, the isolation is just like a snowball which is growing in people's heart. People seldom communicate with each other and hardly believe in each other. Because selfishness and fright fill their hearts, they are afraid that people who have higher social status than them will laugh at or look down upon them. So, they try their best to cover and hide themselves under the surface of the material.

In *Shreds of Tenderness*, Odie and Stella are children of the same family but they do not agree on many issues especially Wak's return after exile. Odie sent an announcement over the radio claiming

that his brother Wak had died, something that was done out of greed and jealousy expressed by Odie. She tells Odie that the queer experiments he has been performing is a mental or psychological issue. He needs a psychiatrist Dr Kyambadde to treat him because his behaviour is mechanical in nature. This is one of the key elements of absurd drama.

Stella: (conciliatory) Your experiments will lead you nowhere as far as understanding the psychology of a murderer is concerned.

Odie: Maybe, maybe not. On the other hand, if this present system is to turn us into robots and silent observers at every blatant crime, mine is to make your specimens SCREAM for their rights.

Stella: (Unconsciously bold) You don't believe that, do you? Ten years of silence and all sudden experiments on how to make your specimens scream for their rights. Something fishy somewhere. Something is decidedly fishy. (Shreds of Tenderness, p. 27).

Odie tells Stella that all the time they had been together has been a hard time for him. Their desires and pursuits are put in their hearts silently even if they have rights to express them. In *Waiting for Godot*, the boys seem to be good friends, but the relationship between them is isolated and unconcerned. They cannot bring any warmth and comfort to each other. They communicate in just a few of words without much feeling and concern (Wang, 1995) The condition of little care or concern would make people feel lonely and helpless. The characters feel isolated from the others. The headman addresses himself because of the rift between him and the others who cannot communicate with him because of social status and rank.

Headman: This is not the navy where you get instant obedience (announcing again) Nine minutes to go; don't say I didn't warn you. Nine minutes. Nine minutes; don't say I sent you to graves. Dogs are prohibited, goats....

Headman: That's a good old man. That's its grandpa. A little trot does it. A little shamble. We are leaving no food for The Floods. No food for The Floods.

He lacks a partner to talk to and finds himself talking. This is also evidenced when Kyeyune talks to some object outside while in the kitchen.

Kyeyune: (Addressing some object outside) If I must die, Irresistible one, spare me the lure of your beckon. My feet trudging towards the shore and my eyes glued to the one with the three nails stuck in his skull. My head is signed to the bone the straight ones' irreconcilable folly and my hands limp with supplication. I have cracked my voice hoarse in prayer Irresistible one but no one hears! No one bothers. Too engrossed in grabbing and hoarding..... The world around me is falling to pieces, Corpses along the streets...

Kyeyune is disturbed and living a lonely and miserable life where no one bothers about him. He is faced with many challenges and no one is ready to assist him overcome his challenges. He therefore resorts to calling the Irresistible One (probably God) to rescue him in his isolated state. The Boss and the Headman do not understand him and he feels despised because he is a poor man.

The generation that Kyeyune is addressing is also young and they seem not to understand him because of the age difference and life experiences. He glorifies his past something which is not practical to the Headman and Bwogo.

Kyeyune: They will tell you; when it comes to fish Kyeyune has the last word. Big and small, he knows them all. And now The Floods do you think I have lived this long not to know the wind that carries The Floods? Sixty years on this island and you think the radio that was only brought Yesterday knows better? The radio-what mockery! (The Floods, p. 12).

Kyeyune at some stage could not even wish to communicate with them because he feels superior and should be consulted on several issues. He even at times ignored their talk or gives a totally irrelevant answer.

Bwogo: Anyone seen Nankya? (No response from the islanders as they exit)

old one, have you seen a young lady...?

Kyeyune: (Hostile) Are you one of them?

Bwogo: One of them?

Kyeyune: Disciple of the Ogre.

Bwogo: What are you talking about?

Kyeyune: Yes, you must be. Underneath that jacket sleeps the terrible hand of death. I can see the bulge

Bwogo: Have you by any chance seen....?

Kyeyune: There are no men on this island, If that is what is itching you. You finished them. You or your betters! (The Floods, p. 16)

The response that Bwogo gets from Kyeyune is quite different from what he wants as the answer. Psychologically, he feels disturbed and even wishes not to respond. According to him, Bwogo has come only to mock him. He is asked the whereabouts of a lady (Nankya) but in return he is told that he has killed all the men The arguments they also make are absurd in nature and seems to contradict society's ethics Bwogo tells Nankya this:

Bwogo: It does not pay to be pure, you see. To be pure is to be a failure. And the world is sick and tired of failure. Yes the world is sick of failures. Yes the world has no room for those who are pure. Those who are not successful. To wring success from the rocks of life, you have to be hard yourself. Hard and remorseless and unfeeling. That is the gospel according to saint success. (The Floods, p. 45).

Time

Time is a major concern in all absurd plays. We are powerless in the grip of time, which creates and destroys us at its will and without our consent (uncertainty in life). Life is seen as merely an extended journey to the grave, a relentless progress towards nothing (nothing is the most common word in the play). Time can only destroy, and the headman's call to enter the boat is one of the most tragic and moving in the play; we will be off! even though we have nothing to go on to. The Headman has been calling people to enter the boat in order to be rescued from the coming floods he says:

Headman: The boat is leaving...the boat's leaving any moment now! The boat is leaving any moment now! Ten minutes to go and the boat will be off!... in three hours The Floods will ravage this island (The Floods, p. 1).

The fate of a human being is subject to time. The endless call to enter the boat became meaningless to Kyeyune the old man because to him he can tell whether there will be floods or not. His age and experience make him to be in a better place to do so. People are left in fear of drowning due to the looming danger of *The Floods*. *The Floods* are expected to cause destruction of life and properties and that is why people are trying to carry them wherever they are going to seek refuge. A world based on chance can have no orderly time sequence, and thus time has no meaning. The extension, then, is that human life has no meaning. Realizing this, humans will create distractions and diversions, in the form of patterns and reliance on nebulous forces, to provide the purpose and meaning that is inherently lacking in their lives.

CONCLUSION

The theatre of the absurd does not show man in a historical, social, or cultural context, it does not communicate any general views of human life. It is not concerned with conveying information or presenting the problems or destinies of characters that exist outside the author's world (they are created by author, but have their own created life). It is not concerned with the representation of events, the narration of fates, or the adventures of characters. It is instead interested in the presentation of an individual's basic situation. It presents individual human being's intuition of his basic situation as he experiences it.

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