African Performance Review
Vol. 15, No. 2, 2025
pp. 31-48

Fractures and Fissures: Aesthetics of Redress in Contemporary Postcolonial African Theatre[1]

Osita Okagbue
Goldsmiths, University of London

Introduction: Background to African Drama

Literary drama was introduced into Africa as part and legacy of the colonial experience; it was a form that once introduced existed and functioned within its new African context in two ways. First, it was simply introduced as a western cultural form to the colonies for the edification of the European expatriate community. But more significantly, it was insidiously intended to ideologically be a testament to the deficiency in cultural refinement of African peoples who prior to this had relied on their indigenous performance forms for their theatrical engagement and entertainment. During colonialism, it was customary for the colonisers to routinely dismiss major forms of African performance, such as music or dance as 'noise' or 'jumping about'. Even the highly developed story-telling tradition that existed was not deemed to be artistic or to have any aesthetic merit. European plays were vigorously presented as the finest there was. No one performed the role of Europe's best dramatist better than Shakespeare, who was touted as the finest playwright that ever wrote. His plays, in fact, became synonymous with colonialism and as such forever held up as a model to be copied by the emerging African drama. Alongside Shakespeare were also the Greeks, and Greece of course was presented as the birthplace of Western theatre; in addition, there were other European, mainly French playwrights, who were introduced, especially in Francophone African countries.

[1] DOI: https://doi.org/10.30817/0152.apr0213

Of what importance is this both in the emergence of contemporary African literary drama and its development since? The major significance of this history is the fact that it reveals that contemporary African drama, by its very history and intention, could not but be postcolonial and thus political, both in its aesthetics and subject matter. Prior to the colonial encounter, different African cultures and societies had their forms of theatrical performances. Significantly, most of these performances were not drama in the Western sense of plays with clear storylines, plots, realistic characters, staged indoors on specially constructed proscenium stages, and often at night. Rather, what Africans had (and still have) were performances based on indigenous theatre aesthetics and sensibilities. The only instance of a dramatic tradition that one can speak of is *kotelon*, the satiric comedies of the Bamana of Mali. However, the *kotetlon* differed significantly from the Western European drama, especially its orality, staging style and performer-spectator relationship.

Drama, therefore, was a colonial introduction into the African cultural space, and thus an alien form which Africans had to get used to, and, in fact, are still getting used to many years after it arrived on the continent as evidenced by the fact that drama/theatre going is still a minority pastime often indulged in by elite or educated members of the society. Drama's colonial association meant that it was received rather ambivalently by Africans – the receptions hovering between, suspicion of it as one of the instruments of indoctrination by the coloniser, and paradoxically embraced with enthusiasm, consumed, copied, adopted and later mastered and used to challenge the coloniser's intellectual dominance. The first plays introduced were mainly classical Greek drama such as those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and Euripides, then Shakespeare, the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas, Restoration Drama, and later Shaw, Moliere, Feydeau and other European dramatists and some American plays. But of all of these, Shakespeare was the most visible and seemed to have had the greatest impact; this was made possible by his central place in the colonial educational literature curriculum and performance programme; and this has continued to be so in many African countries post colonialism where he remains a must dramatist for study from primary school to university theatre programmes.

In introducing western drama into Africa, its specific conventions of staging, such as the proscenium stage, performances that take place at night, linear plot, dialogue etc., were also introduced. However, the major characteristic of the plays was that

they told European stories – English, British, French, Greek. That is, they told the story of the coloniser – his/her history, culture and society. There was no place in this theatre for the story of the colonized; there were hardly any African or colonised characters in the European plays. And even in instances, such as in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Othello* in which the colonised or alien Other appears, the stories were told from the perspective of the coloniser. *The Tempest i*n particular, a play that was ostensibly about colonization – of Caliban and Ariel by Prospero – reproduced the classic tropes used by colonisers and imperialists to justify colonial invasions as Prospero is presented as a benign and good presence, while Caliban, who rightfully demands his freedom and island back is presented as the troublesome ungrateful savage; Ariel is the ideal colonised subject, a good servant because he is non-confrontational and does all of Prospero's bidding and is willing to wait for the latter to grant him his freedom. It is true that within the colonial context the 'power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them' (Said, 1993, 1994, p, xiii) The denied and blocked story of the colonised therefore needed to be told while the misrepresentations by the coloniser needed to be challenged and dismantled. As Said (1993, 1994) again points out 'stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history'. (p, xiii) It thus is correct to say that contemporary African literary drama arose as a postcolonial desire and need by Africans to 'write back' to the empire, to tell the story of the colonised from the perspective of the colonised. This new theatre set out to give stage voice and visibility to the silenced and marginalized native whose story, history and culture had been, according to Fanon, wilfully 'distorted, disfigured and destroyed' in colonial literatures and historiography (Fanon, 1967: 170).

> Thus, African drama emerged more or less fully politicised, whether in its initial preoccupation with just copying Western drama by putting African characters on the stage or creating plays 'whose scenes take place in surroundings' not 'far removed from the African own, and in which things spoken about have a relationship with problems of the African audience' (Henshaw 1957, in Okagbue, 1993: 292), or in the later postcolonial tradition of initiating counter-narratives and counter-discursive engagement with colonial historiography and literature, a task that Chinua Achebe describes as teaching "my readers that their past—with all its imperfections— was not one long night of savagery from which the first

Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them." (Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 1975) In his novels, especially those he set in the past such as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Achebe is keen to demonstrate that

> African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period, and it is this dignity that they must now regain. (Achebe, 1964, 'The Role of a Writer in a New Nation', p 157)

This paper will now discuss how contemporary African plays create a space for telling previously marginalised, denigrated or silenced African stories, histories and cultures. And because by inspiration and intention these plays are postcolonial, it is not surprising that they deploy the strategies of postcolonial writing and engagement. The strategies range from the splintering and fissuring of colonial narratives and history in order to initiate a counter-narrative and recuperative engagement with history, the re-affirmation and re-instatement of African cultures, a counter-discursive challenge and shift in the centre-margin dialectics of colonial discourse, or fracturing and domesticating inherited colonial cultural and artistic forms that had been used as instruments of domination. The paper will use Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Werewere Liking's *Singuè Mura: Considérant que femme…* and Mbogeni Ngema, Percy Mtwa and Barney Simon's *Woza Albert!* to show how African dramatists engage in this postcolonial re-evaluation of history, cultural affirmation to challenge and correct the misrepresentations and distortions of African histories, cultures and peoples found in colonial history and literature.

Location and Dislocation: Postcolonial Subjectivity and the African Story

Implied in every story, whether history or literature, is a position or location from which the narrator speaks. Concurrently also, for every story that is told there are countless others that are not told; for every standpoint, there are also others that could have been taken but are not. There is always selection and choice in the telling of a story. Colonial narratives were no different. Colonial narratives often depended on centre-periphery dialectic and binary in which the colonizer was the centre and as such the subject of the story, while the colonized was the periphery or

the object. Postcolonial narrative, on the other hand, while not denying a centre-periphery positioning and relationship emphasises the relativity of the centre-periphery schema by highlighting the inherent possibility of inverting or shifting this relationship. Postcolonial narrative foregrounds that there are no fixed centres and margins – that is, that every margin is a centre in and for itself while every centre conversely is a margin of other centres.

The ability to have a voice and therefore to occupy a subject position is essential in all narratives, and especially those pertaining to questions of identity. Colonial narrative in order to establish itself and hold sway in the colonial context had to deny subject positions to the colonised; and it had attempted to achieve this objective in two ways, either by writing the colonised completely out of history and literature – through the myth of virgin, uncultivated and unoccupied lands, the Dark Continent in the case of Africa, the mysterious dark womb of the world where life was yet unformed, in its infancy; or when it was impossible to write the natives out, they were represented as lacking in meaningful articulate speech as in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where only the Europeans were capable of speech while the Africans, including the mysterious African Woman, Kurtz's mistress, utter gibberish and incomprehensible sounds that Marlow does not understand even though the assembled African characters in fact respond to her in a highly respectful manner, indicating their understanding and deference to her position and undeniable authority (see Achebe, 1975, 1975). Or Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* who Prospero (the European usurper of his land) claims to have taught language as he is perceived to have had none prior to his encounter with the latter. In both works, the colonized are not subjects of the narratives; rather they were spoken for and about by the colonizer as the subject and narrator. Thus, one can see from the example of the two texts that colonial narrative to justify the colonial enterprise and its exploitative practices objectified and silenced the colonised whose story must not be told or heard. However, as evident from postcolonial writing, the colonised never acquiesced in their colonisation and subjugation; they were not always the 'good native' desired, and often presented as grateful, docile and silent objects or bodies of the colonisers' narratives. In fact, postcolonial writings show that the challenge to colonial authority and cultural hegemony began the moment colonialism began; thus, the postcolonial questioning and undermining of the narratives of colonialism existed while colonialism lasted and continues long after colonialism ended because the structures and imprints of colonialism run deep and last a long time.

What then are the strategies deployed in this postcolonial project of rebuttal of the tropes and narratives of colonial writing? Postcolonial African plays carry out their politics of challenging colonialism aesthetically by fracturing the colonial narratives, dislocating and often subverting the subject positions and narrative structures established in them by colonial historiography and literature. Some plays, such as *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, engage directly with history, some, such as *Death and the King's Horseman*, *Singué Mura: Considérant que femme…*, deal with denigrated and often misrepresented African cultural practices, but mostly all of them engage in appropriating and domesticating the colonisers' artistic forms; however, they are underpinned by a politics and aesthetic of function and relevance. This aesthetic of re-dress involves a set of strategies ranging from recovering and recuperating history, reaffirming culture and indigenous practices, challenging and subverting colonial narratives and assumptions, and domesticating Western dramatic forms and conventions. Contemporary African drama is thus a postcolonial oppositional dramaturgy which creates space for multiple voices and in which the reader or audience is left to make the final judgement.

One of the strategies used by postcolonial African dramatists is inverting the subject positions or altering the location of speaking – what Homi Bhabha (2006, p, 155-7) refers to as the 'act of enunciation' which is a recognition that culture comes into contact and existence within the Third Space precisely at the point of utterance or activation when cultural differences are revealed. As pointed out above, colonial narratives extol the centre-margin dialectic in which the colonised/native is the margin while the coloniser is the centre; the coloniser is the subject of the narrative while the colonized is the object. This relationship is strongly challenged and changed in postcolonial narrative by making the colonized as also the subject of the narrative, the owner and teller of the story. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1993) refers to this challenge or shift in the locus of speech in narrative as 'moving the centre'. We see it very well illustrated in Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and wa Thiong'o and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, two plays that undertake the task of re-presenting history and simultaneously recuperating heroes from the African past.

In the first play, Rotimi revisits the story of Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, the 19th century ruler of the Kingdom of Benin – a man who, according to Rotimi, was for 'long portrayed by the biases of Colonial History in the mien of the most

abominable sadist' to have ruled the people of Benin (in Okagbue, 2009: 60). Rotimi revises this history by telling it not from the perspective of the colonisers, but from that of Oba Nogbaisi. The play becomes his story about his kingdom and his political and economic battle with the British; Nogbaisi is the subject of the story and thus an actor in history and not the dehumanised, savage and spoken/written about object of colonial history. Colonial narratives presented him as a bloodthirsty sadistic tyrant who killed people at will for no excuse; whereas in Rotimi, he kills but an explanation is provided for why he gave the order for disloyal subjects to be executed. In fact, in the play there is a trial of the culprits before their execution indicating that at least due process had been followed before the executions. Thus, the image of the oba that emerges from the play is that of an embattled monarch called upon to make countless difficult decisions simultaneously. Where colonial history vilifies him, the play humanises him without making him a saint or martyr.

Ngũgĩ and Mugo do something similar in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*; they take the circulating colonial narratives about Dedan Kimathi and the Mau Mau revolt and fracture the story to reveal the biases of colonial history in its narration of the Kimathi-led anti-colonial resistance in Kenya between 1952 and 1960. Colonial historians and apologists, such as Carothers (1954), Leakey (1952 and 1954), Ruark (1955 and 1962), Ian Henderson (1958) and Ian Henderson and Philip Goodhart. (1958), completely ignore the political and economic underpinnings of the Mau Mau story, instead they concentrate on presenting Kimathi and members of Mau Mau - who were and saw themselves as anti-colonialist freedom fighters - as terrorists whose bestiality was totally beyond the bounds of accepted 'civilised' human behaviour. The blurb to Henderson and Goodhart's *Manhunt in Kenya* screams 'INTO THE HEART OF DARKNESS':

> In the early 1950s, in the African colony of Kenya, fanatical Mau Mau terrorists struck and struck again in a violent reign of horror. The explosive bloodbath was not reserved for only the white British settlers – black tribal victims outnumbered Europeans one hundred-fold. The terrorism fed upon itself in an orgy of death… (1958)

One of course is reminded by this colonial self-righteous outrage and tone of the insidious power and enduring influence which Achebe argues Conrad's novel continued to have in the colonial imaginary long after it was written – Mau Mau is Africa and Africa is the 'heart of darkness'.

Other representations of the Mau Mau included these by Carothers who saw the uprising as 'an anxious conflictual situation' in a people who had lost 'the constraining and supportive influence of their own culture' but had not lost their magic mode of thinking'. The natives, he concludes, had fallen prey to 'some sophisticated egotist' who exploited the cultural lacuna to lead them into a revolt. (1954: 30; in Okagbue, 2009: 58) and Leakey (1952, 1954) who describes Mau Mau, Kimathi and Kikuyu politicians as 'megalomaniacs out to destabilise the colonial social and political order' (in Okagbue 2009: 58-9). Yet, others, such as the British Parliamentary Delegation sent to Kenya to investigate the Mau Mau anti-colonial resistance revolt returned to England in 1954 convinced that 'Mau Mau intentionally and deliberately sought to lead the Africans of Kenya back to the bush and savagery, not forward into progress'. (in Maughan-Brown, 1985: 49) Thus using historical, psychological, anthropological and literary narratives, the colonisers sought to explain the Mau Mau revolt and the Kenyan anti-colonial movement in ways that were far from the truth of what the movement and conflict were about; however, what underpins all the colonialist discourse 'surrounding the Mau Mau is the fact that they were all to an astonishing degree dependent on the reproduction and constant reshuffling of the key terms of the core myth of African primitivism, atavism, savagery, regression, and of course, darkness' (Maughan-Brown, 49, Okagbue 59). These were the essential tropes of colonial writings about and representations of Africa, as well as other colonised peoples.

It is this image of Kimathi, the Mau Mau and their coordinated challenge of colonial authority and its dispossession and oppression of the Kenyan peoples that the play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, sets out to repudiate by fracturing that enduring colonial myth and representing it as an African story. The dramatists make this objective clear in the opening section of the play when they write that their intention in writing the play was to present an alternative image of:

> …the same man of courage, of commitment to the people as had been graphically described to us…. An even important spur was the realization that the war which Kimathi led was being waged with even greater vigour all over Africa and in all those parts of the world where imperialism still enslaved people and stole their wealth. It was important that all this was put together as one vision… (Preface to the play)

The dramatists take the same historical material used by European historians, travel and fiction writers to create a totally different image of Kimathi and the nationalist resistance which he led from that which apologists of colonialism left in their works. They achieve this by imaginatively recreating and re-presenting the collective will of the Kikuyu peasants and workers who refused to be broken 'by the yoke of an oppressive and exploitative colonial' regime. (Okagbue, 2009: 61)

Soyinka performs a similar reclamation and reaffirmation of Yoruba culture and history in his retelling of the story of Elesin Oba in *Death and the King's Horseman.* The play recalls an actual historical event that took place in Oyo, Western Nigeria in 1944 when the Alaafin – the traditional ruler - died and Elesin, his Master of the Horses (his right-hand man or chief minister) was expected to commit ritual suicide to accompany him to the land of the ancestors. As expected, forty days after the Alaafin's death the Elesin got himself ready and begins the journey across town to the chamber where he was to kill himself. Unfortunately, this ritual is interrupted by the white colonial District Officer and the king's horseman is prevented from fulfilling his role. In shame and to preserve the honour of his family, his son Olunde kills himself in his father's place. But as Andrew Gumbel who reviews a recent production of the play in London writes:

> Soyinka's play explores the gulf in understanding between the horseman, who happily accepts his fate, and the Dickensian district officer, who views this potential suicide as barbaric. (*The Guardian*, April 8, 2009)

It is this disparity in understanding between the king's horseman and the district officer in what the former was expected by his culture to do and the colonial officer's perception of it as barbaric and his insensitive determination to disregard the existential and theological value of the suicide that Soyinka highlights in the play. Pilkings' attitude and subsequent action of preventing Elesin from fulfilling his role is symptomatic of colonialism's disregard and sometimes concerted actions to eradicate local customs and cultures in its pursuit of dominance and control of native peoples and colonial subjects.

Soyinka in retelling this story cleverly frames it as being centred on differing notions of duty and honour – the main characters each perceive what they do as being in the line of the duty expected of them, and this includes the district officer and the Prince of Wales who is visiting the colony at the time. If each is performing their duty, then what right does Pilkings have to stop Elesin from performing his seems to be the key question the play poses. Elesin's suicide may appear barbaric to a European or anyone from outside the Yoruba culture, but so are the actions of the British in sending young men to go and die in a senseless war which they were fighting in Europe at the time the play is set. Thus, one culture had no right to judge and determine actions and morality for another culture as this may be coming from a position of ignorance as seems to have been the case in the Elesin affair in 1945. In stating this position, Soyinka, while not advocating ritual suicide *per se*, exposes the arrogance of a colonial culture/institution which imposes its views on a colonized culture and in so doing puts the world of the colonized in peril as Iyaloja points out to Elesin when they bring Olunde's dead body to the prison cell in the final scene of the play. Soyinka thus turns this event, which at the time had been perceived by the colonial authority as negative and barbaric, into an act that had meaning and existential value for the Yoruba people. Soyinka recuperates an African cultural practice by presenting Elesin's expected suicide as having significance and meaning within the Yoruba context in which it exists and that Pilkings' intervention to stop the ritual amounted to the usual arrogant colonial dismissal or suppression of a native custom which it either did not fully understand, or which challenged its authority. Pilkings' attitude to the culture of the natives displays a typical colonial mono-perspective and universalization of experience – Pilkings interprets Elesin's intended suicide through the prism of his European culture and at no time does he, unlike Jane, his wife, try to see things from the Yoruba point of view.

The three plays respectively fracture and fissure a prevailing colonial narrative and underlying tropes to re-interpret and recuperate a silenced colonized narrative. They do this mainly by shifting the centre of each story so the colonized is the subject who narrates and not the object narrated, as is the case in colonial history and literature. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and *Death and the King's Horseman* challenge the

centre-periphery dynamic of the colonial relationship by also placing the African characters at the centre of each story. Kimathi, Oba Ovonramwen and Elesin and Olunde are made subjects of their stories and so even when one does not fully agree with their actions, one respects their humanity and right to make mistakes and their right to also take full responsibility for those actions.

Domestication and the Politics of Writing Back

In introducing the western dramatic tradition into colonial Africa, its specific conventions of staging, such as the proscenium stage, night performances, linear dramatic structure, dialogue, etc. were also introduced. Through the colonial education system Africans encountered and embraced this western theatrical form of the literary play. This meeting can be characterised as having occurred in three distinct phases. The first phase was the stage of enthralled admiration of an alien form of entertainment when Africans became exposed to European plays such as those of Shakespeare, his contemporaries, those who predated him and those who came after him. The second stage was marked by a slavish imitation of the form when pioneer African dramatists began writing plays that copied both the language and structure of the western play; this phase created what can be referred to as 'Euro-African drama' - these are plays that mainly sought to just place African characters on stage even if the plays they appear in are anything but African in conception, structuration and realisation. Plays of this period include *This is Our Chance*, *Dinner for Promotion* and *Children of the Goddess* by Henshaw, Sarif Easmon's *Dear Parent and Ogre*, Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards*, Onitsha Market plays such as *Veronica My Daughter* by Ogali Ogali and *The Last Days of Lumumba* by Thomas Iguh. Also belonging in this category would be James Ngũgĩ's *The Black Hermit*, some of the plays of the South African pioneer dramatist, Herbert Dhlomo, such as *Nongqause - The Girl Who Killed to Save* (1935), *Shaka*, *Cetshwayo* and *The Pass*. The third phase initiated a postcolonial appropriation and domestication of the Western dramatic form, including sometimes its conventions of character, plot, staging, and overall theatre/performance sensibilities. Much in the same way that postcolonial dramatists reaffirm, reclaim and recuperate African histories in the three plays discussed above, a majority of truly African postcolonial plays reaffirm and adapt indigenous African theatrical forms and sensibilities to destabilise and reconfigure the borrowed or

appropriated western dramatic form and its associated theatrical conventions.

Thus, fracturing and fissuring in African literary drama does not only apply to the colonial narrative; it in fact extends to the dramatic form itself in what Christopher Balme (1999) sees as a process/act of 'decolonising the stage' or as Gilbert and Tompkins point out, that,

> When traditional elements are incorporated into a contemporary play, they affect the play's content, structure, and style, and consequently its overall meaning/effect. (1996: 54)

This decolonising act does not happen only when African playwrights fracture the dramatic form by incorporating indigenous African performance elements in their plays, but also when they adapt or rework Western classics as in Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*, Aime Cesaire's *A Tempest* or Efua Sutherland's *Edufa* – which are adaptations of Sophocle's *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Euripides' *Alcestis* respectively. As the colonised did with the coloniser's language – English, French and Portuguese – a similar domesticating process has happened with the Western dramatic form. African playwrights infuse their postcolonial phase original plays with indigenous African performance elements such as music, song, dance to create dramatic plots and performance structures that deliberately shun the Western predilection for linearity in narrative construction; the result is a hybrid drama that comes across to the Western critic and audience as strange and that refuses to be understood and judged by Western critical frames. These postcolonial African plays that delight in fracturing the alien dramatic form may often appear episodic because the dramatic action does not follow the 'principle of causality' of the Aristotelian model 'in which events follow each other in an uninterrupted stream of inevitability'. (Okagbue, 2009: 191)

This deliberate rejection of the Aristotelian principles of drama is a major aspect of the postcolonial process of liberating African drama and theatre from the hegemony of an essentially Western (European) dramatic mode of structuring and aesthetic. The deliberateness means that the African

postcolonial play makes no apologies for its hybridity - hybridity in the view of this paper being the existential condition of the postcolonial subject. One can in fact argue that the fracturing and fissuring, especially through the insertion of indigenous African oral theatre styles and elements such as music, song, dance, and mime is part of the postcolonial need and 'quest for an African identity that is neither enslaved nor ashamed by' Africa's colonial history and experience. (Okagbue, 2009: 198). Many plays by contemporary African playwrights belong to this tradition and are good exponents of its style of dramaturgy. However, the three plays that best exemplify this tradition of dramatic writing are *Death and King's Horseman*, *Woza Albert!* by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon, and *Singuè Mura…* by Were Liking; the three will be used to illustrate the level of fracturing and fissuring of Western drama that has gone into postcolonial African dramatic writing.

The three plays exhibit an awareness and deep influence of indigenous African performance sensibilities in their structures and theatrical realisation. As already pointed out above, a cumulative associative sensibility derived from an African cosmological system is key to understanding contemporary African literary plays, which, in general, shun the Aristotelian linear plot of beginning, middle and end. A major characteristic of the African associative sensibility is the refusal to be bound by linearity, beginnings and endings, or a compartmentalisation of human experience; a major premise of this mode of perception and comprehension is the idea that no phenomenon is seen or taken as complete or finished until it is seen and understood in relation to other phenomena. Deployed as a technique or style of textual construction or engagement, this means that the full meaning and significance of play or actions within it is/are never known until the performance is over or the text ended.

Death and the King's Horseman and *Singuè Mura…* are deliberately structured as rituals which by their nature are transformative while being excursions into knowledge and enhanced awareness. At first glance, *Death and the King's Horseman* is like a normal five scene/act play with two scenes dealing with Africans and two dealing with Europeans while the fifth brings both sides together. However, the play shows how the colonizer intrudes and interrupts an African cultural practice and the African (Yoruba) world that

was depending on Elesin's ritual suicide to join his dead king. The play, however, is not just a straightforward narration of this event as Soyinka cleverly layers the action with moments of song, music, dance, mime, masquerade, proverbs and wordplay by and between many characters. Similarly, *Singuè Mura…* is anything but a straight play in the Western sense of drama; rather, Liking totally explodes the dramatic form to enable her insert a variety of indigenous African ritual elements, music, masked dancers, shadow puppets, traditional healers and spiritual forces in a play structure so tense that it threatens to burst its seams at any given moment. Watching or reading *Singuè Mura…* is a powerful immersive experience, because all these elements combine sinuously to create a space for the audience to undertake an experiential journey akin to a transformative rite whose full effect is cumulatively achieved when the last action is presented.

The deliberate insertion of indigenous African performance elements like music, song, dance, puppets, masks, storytelling, call-and-response, direct performer-spectator interaction, all within an elastic scenic envelop is intended to destabilise a rigid dramatic form in which narrative and staging are framed on a principle of progressive inevitability with action proceeding as a series of cause and effect linkages. These indigenous African elements question fixity by encouraging and establishing an African principle of impermanence and flux as an essence of human actions and existence. Soyinka (1975, 1999) establishes and foregrounds the contrast between the scenes – in keeping with an African preference for open and public spaces/settings for performance displays, he sets the African scenes in the open:

> *A passage through a market in its closing stages…* ***Elesin Oba*** *enters along a passage pursued by his drummers and praise-singers…* (p, 308)

and

> *frontage of a converted cloth stall in the market. The floor leading up to the entrance is covered in rich velvets and woven cloth…* (p, 335).

While the European scenes are mostly indoors:

> *The veranda of the District Officer's bungalow… and glimpsed*

> *through the wide windows and doors which open onto the forestage [verandah], are the shapes of* **Simon Pilkings** *and his wife,* **Jane** *tangoing in and out of the shadows in the living-room.* (p, 324)

and

> *the front side of the stage is part of a wide corridor around the great hall of the Residency extending… into the rear wings.* (p, 348)

The fifth scene has elements of both as it involves African and European characters - *A wide iron-barred gate stretches almost the whole width of the cell in which* **Elesin** *is imprisoned…* (p, 365). Thus, the African scenes which demand African indigenous staging arrangements are intended to pressurise the dramatic form and its picture-frame proscenium staging and it is significant that the European scenes can all fit into a proscenium space whereas the African ones will be constrained were they to be put in a proscenium frame.

Both *Singuè Mura* and *Woza Albert!* also reject the indoor proscenium setting and staging; in fact, *Woza Albert!* is everywhere and nowhere, reflecting the resistance to fixed time and place characteristic of African cosmology and thought. *Woza Albert!* is made up twenty-six quick-moving scenes with the longest, Scene 18, covering 13 pages of often very short dialogue between the two characters while the short scenes 6, 7, 10, 14, 21 and 25 have either one or two lines of dialogue. It is a fast-paced play whose setting is an open space with no walls and which rapidly transforms into many locations – a street, prison work yard, a moving train, airport arrival, a barber's open air stall, back of a lorry, Albert Street (The Pass Office), Coronation Brickyard, the notorious John Vorster Square, television studio, a helicopter in mid-flight and graveyard. *Singuè Mura* is similarly made up of many episodes - they are not called scenes; in fact, Liking calls them movements, impulses, refluxes, fluxes, and waves which take place in settings that include a village square, a sanctuary/primordial space, a courtyard dotted with fireflies, and room in a clinic. These spaces represent both the human world and the otherworldly realms and characters and as such are perpetually fluid and difficult to fix as one place or time.

And to support such complex and fluidly changing landscapes, actions and characters in the plays, the interjections of music, dance, mime are used to

avoid an over-reliance on dialogue so the story in each play is allowed to progress through these other mediums. The mediums are used not just to support the dialogue but as veritable vehicles for transmitting the message and meaning of the play. Thus, a major difference between contemporary African literary theatre and its western progenitor is that this style of space use, structure and story-content frees African theatre from logo-centrism while transforming it into a multiplex dramatic form that communicates with its audience through multiple sensory mechanisms and stimuli of sound, sight, smell and touch. It is a theatre of the whole body for the performer as it is for the spectator. The concept of total theatre is a hallmark of this form of oppositional dramaturgy in which the central meaning of a play is willingly transferred to the spectator rather than the dramatist, director or actors, as is the case in Western theatre. This also is underpinned by the idea from indigenous theatre that the spectator decides ultimately what the play is, what direction the performance takes and what meanings can thus be drawn from it – the theatre is an encounter process between the spectator, the performer and together they create the performance text very often different from the playwright's script.

Conclusion

Postcolonial African drama it has been revealed involved the splintering of dominant imperial/colonial master narratives either to insert the colonised and make them the subject of their narrative and history or create new narratives that reclaim, reaffirm and recuperate the denigrated cultures and histories of the colonised. The outcome of this oppositional yet affirmative dramaturgy is a creative disfigurement and destabilisation of the erstwhile colonial narrative and the emergence of a hybrid postcolonial African drama. This hybrid drama, because it occupies as well as represents Bhabha's Third Space, transcends earlier narratives; it specifically transcends the one-dimensionality of previous colonial narratives and restores the silenced and marginalised narrative of the colonised. This is precisely what plays such as Rotimi's Ovonramwen *Nogbaisi* and Ngũgĩ and Mugo's *The Trial of Dean Kimathi* do – the two main characters who are key figures from African history, but who have previously been negatively represented in colonial historiography and literature are represented and their images recuperated. Unlike previous narratives, especially the colonial narratives, this new drama creates space to accommodate multiple

perspectives that produce a more balanced view of reality. However, it is important to stress that this disfigurement is not achieved through a repeat or replication of the silencing and universalisation of human experience and history as was the practice in colonial narratology. Rather, the disfigurement comes about because of the postcolonial desire to create a space for the co-existence of multiple experiences and perceptions; Soyinka's play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, for instance, gives voice to both the Yoruba and English characters, cultures and the politics they represent – the reader or audience members are enabled to see how both sides see the ritual suicide of Elesin and they are also able to see that even characters from the same side see it differently, such as Simon and his wife, Jane, or Sergeant Amusa, who although an African has become a Muslim convert and so should not, in Simon's eyes, believe such 'mumbo-jumbo'. (Soyinka, 1975, 1999: 325)

Overall, postcolonial African theatre in its avowed practice of fracturing and fissuring to create an oppositional dramaturgy deploys what can best referred to as an aesthetics of redress that engages with Western European drama and theatre at two levels: first, at the level of theme and second, at the level of form. Thematically, postcolonial African drama takes colonial narratives and reconfigures them, either by changing the subject positions, rearranging their temporal and thus plot sequences to indicate/foreground the relative nature and the existence of multiple perspectives, exposing its silences and thereby forcing the texts to speak differently from their originals. In terms of form, postcolonial fracturing appropriates the Western dramatic form and domesticates it by inserting indigenous African performance elements such as music, song, dance into a non-linear narrative structure that is deeply influenced by an African storytelling and oral performance sensibility. The drama created out of this postcolonial creative alchemy is a strange and familiar theatre that transcends both its African and European past and yet speaks to both simultaneously. Most African plays do this, but in this study Liking's *Singuè Mura…*, Soyinka's *Death and King's Horseman* and Mtwa, Ngema and Simon's *Woza Albert!,* demonstrate this style of drama very well.

References

Achebe, Chinua (1975, 1977, 1989), 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness', *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*, New York, London: Doubleday

Achebe, Chinua (1964), 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', *Nigeria Magazine* No 81

Achebe, Chinua (1975), M*orning Yet on Creation Day*, London, Michigan: Heinemann Educational Books/Michigan University

Balme, Christopher (1999), *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-colonial Drama*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bhabha, Homi K (2006), "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, New York: Routledge, p. 155–157.

Carothers, J.C (1953), *The African Mind in Health and Disease*, Geneva: World Health Organisation

Carothers, J. C (1954), *The Psychology of Mau Mau*, Nairobi: Government Printers

Gilbert, Helen & Tompkins, Joanne (1996), *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, London: Routledge

Leakey, Louis (1952), *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu*, London: Methuen

Leakey, Louis (1954), *Defeating the Mau Mau*, London: Methuen

Liking, Werewere (2001), 'Singuè Mura: Considérant que la femme…' in *Theatre Forum*, Issue 19, Summer/Fall

Maughan-Brown, David (1985), *Land, Freedom and Fiction*, London: Zed Books

Mtwa, Percy, Ngema, Mbongeni & Simon, Barney (1983), *Woza Albert !*, London: Methuen

Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o (1993), *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, Suffolk: James Currey.

Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o and Mugo, Micere Githae (1976), *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, London: Heinemann Educational Books

Okagbue, Osita (1993), 'James Ene Henshaw' in *Contemporary Dramatists*, Fifth Edition, London, Washington DC: St James Press

Okagbue, Osita (2009), *Culture and Identity in African and Caribbean Theatre*, London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers

Rotimi, Ola (1974), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi: An Historical Tragedy in English*, Ibadan, Nigeria: Oxford University Press

Said, Edward (1993, 1994), *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage

Soyinka, Wole (1975, 1999), 'Death and the King's Horseman' in Contemporary African Plays, Martin Banham and Jane Plastow (eds.), London: Methuen