

‘When Good People Do Something’: An Alternative, Decentred Discourse on Political Consciousness in Imbuga’s *The Return of Mgofu*

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ABSTRACT: This study employs postcolonial literary theory, particularly the exploration of Bhabha’s third space of cultural enunciation, an alternative political discourse which reifies neither the Orient nor the Occident. It aims at restoring socio-political dignity and promoting a nationally conscious discourse that subverts Western and colonial intentions – a decentred one – as represented in Francis Imbuga’s *The Return of Mgofu*. Using Bhabha’s theoretical lens in the analysis of Imbuga’s play, this study disrupts fixed political discourse that places emphasis on colonialism as the genesis of challenges in contemporary African societies, specifically Kenya. This paper concludes that the play considers this emphasis misguided and advocates for a paradigm shift. The playwright suggests that post-independence nations should not use colonial history as an excuse for political instability. They must face their challenges directly and find practical solutions for the greater good of their countries. The traditional narrative of colonial oppression is no longer relevant; it serves as an escapist strategy. There is a need for an alternative discourse that places the colonised at the centre.

KEYWORDS: Pragmatism, Paradigm Shift, Political Consciousness, Orientalism, Discourse, Cultural Enunciation, Imbuga, *Mgofu*, Dramaturgy)

1. INTRODUCTION

Colonialism has long been, and still is to a great extent, the ‘hero’ of African literature. The challenges faced by African countries have always been traced to the colonial era. Consequently, colonialism has been portrayed as the genesis of post-colonial problems in African societies. While this argument can be supported by evidence from Africa’s colonial history, African societies have also, in a significant way, contributed to the challenges they face. Africans cannot continue burying their heads in the sand; it is high time they took responsibility for their actions and took practical steps to remedy the current situation. ‘Although retracing cultural steps has significantly buttressed efforts towards the restoration of Africa’s lost glory,’ argues Ouno (2020), ‘there are indications that celebration, and, indeed, worship of cultural value systems has blinded Africans to the political realities of the modern-day society. A mere return to Africa’s cultural ancestry is not the solution to Africa’s challenges’ (p. 105). Critical as reflections on colonial history are, contemporary literary writers can re-orient their works to demonstrate the silver lining in taking pragmatic steps towards social transformation.

Francis Imbuga, who is one of the most prolific East African playwrights, is one such writer. Though he wrote two novels, *Shrine of Tears* (1993) and *Miracle of Remera* (2004), he invested his artistic energy in playwriting. He wrote more than ten plays, including *The Fourth Trial* (1972), *Kisses of Fate* (1972), *The Married Bachelor* (1973), *Betrayal in the City* (1976), *Game of Silence* (1977), *The Successor* (1979), *Man of Kafira* (1984), *Aminata* (1984), *The Burning of Rags* (1989), *The Green Cross of Kafira* (2013), and *The Return of Mgofu* (2015). While Imbuga’s entire oeuvre deals with pertinent social issues, I find his engagement with contemporary issues affecting the Kenyan society more pragmatic in *The Return of Mgofu*. In this paper, I, using postcolonial theory as advanced by Bhabha (1994), attempt to demonstrate that social reforms can be realised when ‘good people do something.’ I argue that the playwright castigates political inaction and advocates for active participation in social transformation. *Goodness*, I argue, amounts to nothing when it is not put into practice.

2. THEORY AND METHODS

The literary analysis in this paper is guided by postcolonial literary theory as advanced by Bhabha (1994). Whereas Bhabha has interrogated many aspects of culture, I am particularly interested in what he regards as the ‘third space of cultural enunciation.’ It is the ‘in-between’ zone, a discursive space that opens up when two or more cultures interact. It also recognises that culture is not static and, in this sense, it breaks down rigid binaries, such as East and West, coloniser and colonised and self and other. Meaning and authority are, to this extent, not fixed; new or transformative ideas can emerge from what is generally regarded as fixed

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dichotomies. I argue that there exists a discursive space that goes beyond the colonised/ coloniser dichotomy. The premise that challenges facing postcolonial Kenya, like other African societies, have arisen from her colonial history is dogmatic and bereft of the fluidity that a disruptive approach that advocates for dialogue would provide. I rely on textual data from Imbuga's *The Return of Mgofu*. I, nonetheless, intend to make other intertextual references to reinforce my arguments. The research design employed in this study is, therefore, interpretivist.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The dramatist has always functioned in African society as the recorder of his society's mores and experiences and the voice of reason in his own time. Imbuga gives a more practical solution to the challenges bedeviling post-independent African societies, particularly Kenya, in *The Return of Mgofu*. He avoids the confrontational approach he employs in the Kafira trilogy and his earlier plays. He accords reason a chance in his last literary work. The fictitious society, which allegorises Kenya, is named Mndika. In *The Return of Mgofu*, Imbuga uses ghosts as dissenting voices. Thori and Thoriwa have returned to Mndika to convey a message from the spiritual world. They 'have been here before' (p. 1) and they hope that their words will carry the political weight required to convince 'creatures' in the mortal world 'who call themselves people' (p. 2). They are messengers of those who died long before them. The 'ghost' metaphor, which is central to the African mythological cosmology, suggests folk wisdom.

Imbuga, it appears, is referring to a long generation; Thori and Thoriwa are representing 'these creatures' ancestors. The two are hoping that their message of peace will facilitate the restoration of humanity. Their ancestors witnessed chaos of all sorts during their lifetime: 'people who co-existed for long began pointing fingers at one another,' 'spitting on the village well so that no one could have water,' 'breaking into people's houses and doing sickening things,' violent confrontations over land and property (Imbuga, 2015, p. 4). Imbuga is raising concerns about tribal animosity and how it impacted on the people's co-existence. They hope that 'these creatures' will apologise on behalf of their grandfathers. Thoriwa does not have confidence in these people; he fears for this generation because among them live 'educated thieves.'

The playwright advocates for re-historicisation, a critical re-evaluation of the past. The two, Thori and Thoriwa, are here to remind the current generation that Mndika was once a closely-knit society; people performed rituals, 'sang and danced and laughed together,' and 'even borrowed salt from one another' before 'shaking hands with madness.' Unlike Imbuga's earlier works where 'madness' is methodical and represents the silent voice of 'conscience' as portrayed by the character Juser in *Betrayal in the City* and Agege in *Aminata*, *The Return of Mgofu* presents 'madness' for what it is: chaos, a state of anarchy, absence of social decency or utter lawlessness. One of their important messages is that the virtuous, the good, must resist evil at all costs. Imbuga alludes to Edmund Burke's remark: 'The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing' (2015, p. 5) and, by extension, the central philosophy upon which Soyinka's memoir, *The Man Died*, is anchored: 'The man dies in all of us who keep silent in the face of tyranny' (1985, p. 13).

By precept and example, Soyinka – and Imbuga too, so it seems – demonstrates that man must not die a spiritual or mental death even when they are confronted with the worst forms of humiliation or intimidation. Manhood in this play memoir acquires a transgender vision; the 'man' refers to an undying spirit in a woman or a man, who, faced with adversities, holds fast and furiously to their social ideals. Soyinka was inspired by the severe physical harm meted out to a journalist by Nigeria's despotic regime. This is Imbuga's call in this drama; the good have to remain spiritually fortified to resist evil and must not 'open their heads' and allow 'madness in' and they must not 'warm themselves with the fire of their neighbours' burning skeletons' (2015, p. 5): 'The strongest oak of the forest is not the one that is protected from the storm hidden from the sun. It's the one that stands in the open where it is compelled to struggle for existence against the winds and rains and scorching sun' (2015, p. 7).

Rigidity has blinded postcolonial societies, such as Kenya, to reason and/ or sound judgement. It 'isolates and detaches [one] from political realities. Traditional order has to be re-evaluated to determine its relevance to contemporary societies' (Ouno, 2025, p. 2966). In the same breath, Imbuga's play advocates for disruption of fixed discourse. Mndika's progress lies in this disruption. The three ridges that together make Mndika had once been a spiritually guarded and peaceful family until one night when a 'deranged man or woman set a neighbour's house on fire' (2015, pp. 5-6). Unfortunately, no one bothered to find out who had done it and why they did it; the dreadful eternal darkness caught up with everybody with the exception of Mgofu Ngoda, the old half-blind seer. By killing the 'man' in all of them, they are made to turn blind eyes to this injustice, and this was the beginning of 'the mother of all taboos.' As a result of this political inaction, many houses are burnt to ashes this night, and families are displaced. The sacred cave, the shrine, which is regarded as a safe haven for the distressed, is razed to the ground as a result of people's 'madness':

That same night they followed us to the shrine. 'Get out,' they shouted. 'We have come to protect you... Those who obeyed were killed. Those who chose to stay in the cave were burnt to death. Thoriwa and I were among those who chose to obey.

Our spirits were among the first ones to escape into the mist. ... So you see, we don't belong here. We belong where we have come from. (Imbuga, 2015, p. 8).

These accounts mirror the tragedies that have befallen East African nations as a result of tribal clashes. The burning of places of worship is reminiscent of the 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya, where a church was burnt to the ground as a result of

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ethnic animosity. Similar events have, in the past, been witnessed in other East African countries. In this play, Imbuga is not merely concerned with the mere exposure of the consequences of ethnic animosity; he is proposing a practical solution. Imbuga's strategy here, therefore, is a pragmatic one; he invokes the spirit of the dead to open the painful wounds of the past. He hopes that these first-hand accounts will compel the current generation to rethink their socio-political lives. Thori, Thoriwa, and Mndika's ancestors are not bitter, and this is a powerful social statement; they are keen on avenging themselves on the 'creatures' responsible for their senseless murder; rather, they are recollecting these harrowing events to give room for reconciliation.

Truth, Imbuga seems to suggest in this play, is a pre-requisite for reconciliation. Any meaningful dialogue on the political future of the East African region has to be anchored on transparency. History cannot be erased; people should not be told to forget some of the worst experiences of their lives; they must be able to learn from these experiences because history repeats itself. Thori and Thoriwa 'failed to forget' (2015, p. 9); one who forgets shall be forgotten. This explains why the two cannot forget. Perhaps this is the reason they are the chosen ones – the ancestors and the dramatist have entrusted them with these messages; they find it impossible to forget the good times they had 'growing up here, in the three ridges of Mndika, the name of the sacred place before madness' (2015, p. 8).

Bitterness is a recipe for political madness; this seed of discord must not be sown, even by persons who are worst affected by social injustice. Thori and Thoriwa, like other innocent members of Mndika, 'were burnt to death' by persons who initially claimed they were 'here' to protect them; nonetheless, they are willing to forgive and chart a new political destiny for the people of Mndika. They do not want to be misunderstood; Thoriwa says: 'But don't get us wrong, we are not bitter. The soiled water can still be distilled to freshness. We believe in forgiveness. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven' (Imbuga, 2015, p. 8). For peaceful co-existence to be restored in Mndika, which is a symbol of post-independence East African society, members of the community should be willing to forgive. Here, Imbuga shuns the militant approach he adopts in his earlier plays like *Betrayal in the City*, *Man of Kafira* and *The Green Cross of Kafira* among other political plays. It is a significant change of heart for a literary parting shot and a significant change of dramatic strategy.

The use of dramatic aside not only prepares the audience for the second phase of recollection, but it also injects a sense of political urgency in this play. The playwright seems to be suggesting that danger lies in procrastination; this social vision has to be internalised. This is why Thori breaks away from theatrical conventions or traditions and opts to address the audience directly; the use of aside reveals a moment of truth. Like authorial intrusion in prose fiction, an aside offers the dramatist an opportunity to comment on the events of the story. It offers helpful contextual clues without unnecessarily interrupting the pace of the dramatic narrative. It gives the audience a glimpse into the character's or the dramatist's thoughts. Apart from revealing vital pieces of information and the dramatist's intention, it is a foreshadowing technique. Thori says this directly to the audience:

Prepare yourselves to be transported to Kadesa's shrine, in the forest of ogres in the northern part of Nderema... The story of how Kadesa and several other people had been exiled from Mndika, their motherland, is well known across the ridges. They crossed the border. Authorities of Nderema allowed them to settle in a thick forest near the border. That had been Mndika's first madness. By the time of Mndika's second madness, Kadesa had grown quite old. (Imbuga, 2015, pp. 9-10)

This recollection further shows the negative consequence of tribal tension; people are forcefully displaced and exiled from their homes. The dramatist emphasises that more than one phase of ethnic violence has been witnessed in this society; the exile of Kadesa ushered in a second phase of ethnic tension. The dramatist uses this flashback to accentuate the need for reconciliation; such conflicts are bound to recur unless salient political issues are identified and addressed comprehensively. Brain drain has impacted negatively on post-independence East African societies; those who are exiled are honoured and celebrated outside their nations for their impactful contributions to those nations. Kadesa, for instance, at old age, still manages to establish a popular shrine for exiles in the northern part of Nderema, and she becomes the priestess of the shrine. The shrine of Katigali is a 'reminder of the madness [exiles] witnessed at the old paw paw trees shade before [they] fled to this refugee camp' (Imbuga, 2015, p. 12). Katigali means 'farewell to ogres that wanted to devour their brood.' Kadesa reinforces Thori and Thoriwa's message: 'Our people behaved like deranged animals, killing one another like ruthless brutes. ... So we said farewell to them, farewell to the ogres' (p. 12).

Ogres are used in African orature to suggest extreme evil. The actions of ogres border on the bizarrely inhuman. This imagery creates a mental picture of a dehumanised society, one that is extremely morally decayed. The moment people begin to behave like deranged animals, they cease to be human. Kadesa and other exiles are lucky that they were sent here. Mude says he is here to warn the shrine of Katigali; 'They are at it again. Reliable whispers are that the second madness has broken out in Mndika. You will need protection' (2015, p. 13). The dramatist uses this retrospection to foreground the second phase of political chaos in Mndika. The perpetrators of violence used Katigali as an excuse for their heinous crimes: 'Houses are burning. People are maiming one another and blaming it all on you. Those torching houses are said to be your followers; they claim to have been trained here before your very eyes' (p. 13). Fanon projects the tragedy of tribal madness when he avers:

National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallisation of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilisation of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been. The faults that we find in it are quite sufficient explanation

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of the facility with which, when dealing with young and independent nations, the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state. These are the cracks in the edifice which show the process of retrogression that is so harmful and prejudicial to national effort and national unity. We shall see that such retrograde steps with all the weaknesses and serious dangers that they entail are the historical result of the incapacity of the national middle class to rationalise popular action, that is to say their incapacity to see into the reasons for that action. (Fanon, 1961, pp. 148-149)

This traditional weakness, which is almost congenital to the national consciousness of under-developed countries, Fanon contends, 'is not solely the result of the mutilation of the colonised people by the colonial regime, [but it] is also the result of the intellectual laziness of the national middle class, of its spiritual penury, and of the profoundly cosmopolitan mould that its mind is set in' (Fanon, 1961, p. 149). Just like Ruganda's *Echoes of Silence* where ethnic groups are mobilised to fulfil an egotistical political agenda, the people of Mndika are mobilised here to initiate a new round of ethnic tension.

These reconciliation efforts have to be devoid of hypocrisy from both religious and political leaders. In Mndika, 'preachers, priests and chiefs' participate in a plot 'to shed the blood of their brothers and sisters' (Imbuga, 2015, p. 22). They kill one another over land. Here, too, Imbuga, like Ruganda, introduces the question: 'What is in a name?' In *Echoes of Silence*, Ruganda appears blunt and confronts tribalism head-on, especially the ethnic animosity that exists between Kikuyus and Luos. In *The Return of Mgofu*, Imbuga's approach is non-confrontational as the communities in question are identified by such imaginary names as Nderema and Mndika. People have been mobilised along these ethnic names to perpetuate violence against the 'Other.' Imbuga alludes to Claude McKay's 'If We Must Die' to reinforce his position in this play. Claude McKay was one of the most prominent poets of the black aesthetics movement. 'If We Must Die' is an indictment of cowardly murderous acts that were associated with the discriminatory South (Southern part of the United States). Imbuga chastises disregard for the sanctity of human life. These dehumanising acts of 'madness' may have necessitated Imbuga's change of tact. The circumstances leading to wanton murder and destruction had prompted Adonija to switch political allegiance:

Name? I have already answered that question. Everything starts with a name, and then you are either friend or foe. What is in a name? Father, Pastor or Chief, what do they mean? They hunted one another like mad dogs. I will not be party to this again. They destroyed our good name. This time I said no, not again. I will not be party to this. So I decided to become Mgofu Ngoda's eyes. (Imbuga, 2015, p. 22)

In *The Return of Mgofu*, just like the Kafira trilogy and his other plays, Imbuga relies on 'madness,' a motif that runs through his works, to relay his message. Imbuga advocates for dialogue; East African citizens must listen to one another if any significant progress has to be made. It is not enough to stereotype 'madness.' Imbuga, it appears, is alluding to his literary experiences in earlier works; such characters as Agege and Juser in *Aminata* and *Betrayal in the City*, respectively, are typecast and labelled as socially maladjusted. They make a deeply intellectual contribution to society, but their utterances are dismissed on account of their 'madness.'

The return of Mgofu Ngoda signals the beginning of a new era. This title is prophetic in a number of ways. It signifies Imbuga's return to the East African literary space in a non-physical form. In this spiritual form, Imbuga is relaying the message of his ancestors: communities must put an end to the cycle of violence that continues to impact negatively on the socio-economic and political progress of East African nations. Imbuga, 'old python,' 'died,' but he has 'renewed' himself 'with horns and thistles'; he 'has just come back to us' (p. 23). He finds no better way to convey this message; he utilises drama as a platform for re-enacting this world. Imbuga's *The Return of Mgofu*, like Ruganda's *Echoes of Silence*, advocates for a paradigm shift in political discourse.

4. CONCLUSION

Imbuga's dramaturgy demonstrates that there exist new non-violent modes of engagement that can be adopted as pragmatic strategies for redeeming the image of post-independence East African societies. When good people do something, a new wave of political consciousness can be awakened to facilitate the reconstruction of these postcolonial societies. Imbuga's demonstrates that there is a need for a shift in political focus; the colonised-coloniser dichotomy is still relevant in Africa's political discourse, but only to the extent that such discourses are remodelled to suit the more realistic dichotomy of the neo-coloniser and neo-colonised. African citizens, Imbuga appears to suggest, must be willing to confront their challenges and find lasting solutions. In the quest for peaceful co-existence, the Mndikas, the politically entitled such as Wairi, the Kadesas, and the Nderemas must speak honestly about their past. Imbuga's *The Return of Mgofu* is modelled along the truth, justice, and reconciliation framework that has been used in the past to guide communities through a national healing process. In such political endeavours, good people must speak against ethnic division and ethnic profiling. All the ridges of Mndika should coalesce into a single call for unity.

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