

TRANSPARENT NARRATIVES: A CRITIQUE OF STYLE OF THEATRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN KENYA

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Abstract

*Literary genres and intra-genre typologies have particular stylistic features that define them. Theatre for social justice bespeaks of a theatre programmed to achieve certain goals. We hypothesise that its special purpose has a bearing on the style it employs to accentuate its intent and affects its artistic merit. We will analyse Wakanyote Njuguna's *Before the Storm*, Kithaka Wa Mberia's *Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi* and Kivutha Kibwana's *Kanzala* and interrogate their unique stylistic endowments and performative peculiarities. We investigate whether these texts of theatre for social justice have infractions, what their nature is and what linguistic and extralinguistic forms have been infused in the theatre to advance its purpose and appraise the impact these have on the theatre.*

Key words: *theatre, social justice, style, stylistic infractions*

Introduction

Style in literature refers to the way writers manipulate words, movement and vocalisation to create meaning, mood and nuance in their writing or production. Style is critical as it is one of two key blocks of literary analysis. It speaks to how meaning is constructed, structured and conveyed. When focussing on appreciation of style in theatre for social justice, we will examine how the stylistic devices are integrated in performance for audiences to fully appreciate the art. The stylistic nuances and theatrical presentations will be critically appraised in regard to whether and how they enhance the purpose for which the plays were written.

The three plays under discussion were commissioned by organisations doing civic education in Kenya the 1990s. Kithaka wa Mberia's *Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi* was commissioned by the International Commission of the Red Cross (ICRC) so as to popularize the Geneva conventions in a region/country torn by ethnic strife. Kivutha Kibwana's *Kanzala* was funded by the Centre for Law and Research International (CLARION) in order to popularize education on leadership and political participation. Wakanyote Njuguna's *Before the Storm* was funded by the United States agency for International Development (USAID) to educate people on the rights to assembly and voting. The three plays were authored by theatre artists engaged in traditional/proscenium theatre practice. The three playwrights were prominent theatre artists in the 1980's and 1990's in Kenya and were considered political theatre activists. Political theatre has a long history and is descriptive as a term. Kirkby argues as follows:

Theatre is political if it is *concerned with* the state or *takes sides* in politics. This allows us to define "political theatre" in a way that distinguishes it from other forms of theatre: it is a performance that is intentionally concerned with government, that is intentionally engaged in or consciously takes sides in politics (129)

He further argues that it is intellectual since it deals with "political ideas and concepts usually in an attempt to support or to attack a particular political position" and literary because it "production elements are subservient to, support, and reinforce the symbolic meanings" (130). To him, the politicality of theatre is interpretational and depends on the person reading it or producing it. *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* are political in this nature and they are explicit in pointing out "the institutions and aspects of government that should change; it often describes and supports the exact nature of these changes." (131). According to him, theatre scholars are concerned with how "the content ... relates to particular theatrical devices and techniques. He is concerned with the functional relationships between style and expression, between performance and audience" (132). He posits that the Teatro Experimental de Cali - theatre in Colombo that popularised the Colombian guerrilla war - or the play *La Muette* that fermented the Belgian revolution in 1845 (Kirby 1985: 133) are examples of practical political theatre. He says that all theatre that attempts to send a message to the masses has a binary orientation – an analysis of what is wrong and a prescription of what should be done – something he traces back to Horacian times (p134)

In analysing the three plays, we will be aware of the ambivalence of "political theatre" both as a literary terminology and a stylistic predisposition as has been argued above. We will base the analysis around five broad stylistic choices that, in my view, are made in theatre for social justice. The first stylistic choice is the creation of fluid scripts that are indicative as opposed to

prescriptive. These scripts could be a storyline with “bare” or skeletal characters (for example a beautiful girl) who are fleshed out by the audience from name to character. The conflict is also conjured and its actual generation is developed with the community during performance. This style is most common with Theatre in Education, Theatre for Development and Theatre for Health Education. In this case the performances from community to community vary in detail while maintaining a thematic precept – hence alternative scripts sprout in each community of performance.

A second choice is the creation of theatre pieces and performance as a “safe space”. In this style the theatre consists of theatrical scripts that are “cheap” with slapstick humour and little or no literary depth. An example of this is what Madhawa Palihapitiya, writing about the use of theatre in the Sri Lanka violence that peaked between 1985 and 1992, posits that even though the theatre produced what was considered “cheap thrills” by critics who looked down upon satire,

... Using the resources of their aesthetic form, they were able to be subversive in a climate of repression, without appearing to those in power as a threat. And by attending performances, average citizens could participate in that subversion in a relatively safe way. (75-78)

The “oasis” he referred to is the “safe space” of performance and audience participation. The participation of audiences gives them a sense of power - whether temporary or just symbolic. In Sri Lanka, unlike in Kenya, the warring government and guerrilla groups did not hinder performances, they even financially supported them. He argues that the groups and artists were using local forms of performance and theatre such as ritual, song and dance as a “way for the community to see and to reflect on itself” (81). He argues that since rituals especially are “a deeply embedded form of entertainment, meaning-making and sacred understanding” in the world of the warring communities, the performances were a powerful resource for bridging differences, correcting misperceptions and “helping the country find peace” (82)

The third stylistic choice is the use of the presentational method. This is whereby the theatre is non-fictional and there is a thin veil from the reality. Prendergast and Saxton argue that this theatre

...is more interested in presenting non-fictional material within thinly disguised fictions of authentic contemporary reality. The actor in presentational theatre is less hidden behind the mask of the character and is close to being him or herself – although still protected by the safety of the role – thus enabling the actor to present a character who lives in the world of the audience as well as in the world of the play (12-13)

Social justice theatre practitioners may therefore adopt a style of linguistic choices and character development that mirror the “undramatic” reality in the society it is set in.

The fourth stylistic choice is one of roles assigned to the artists and the audience. Augusto Boal (1995) developed the concept of “spect-actor” in Forum Theatre whereby the audience become participants in the drama – directing it to different resolutions or contributing to the action. The use of the “joker” is integral to this stylistic choice as it recreates *metaxis* (a space in-between the world of the play and the reality) and enables *praxis* (continuous dialectic of reflection and action design). (43) This choice is in a way the best exemplification of the difference of theatre for social justice and other traditional theatre in that the actor-teachers and the audience-actors/spect-actors are engaged in a learning process and the theatre just serves to create a medium for interaction.

The fifth stylistic choice is the role assigned to stories and storytelling. Theatre for social justice mainstreams and integrates the narrative in theatre – storytelling is at the core of popular theatre. The theatre piece may be developed as a narrative that is drawn from the lore of the community and fleshed out to reflect the realities of the community of performance. Alternatively, the unfolding of the drama may be punctuated by a narrator who employs such forms as opening formulas, welcoming the participants to the story and pauses at times to interpret or to discuss with the audience the happenings. Another form maybe where the drama is structured in the oral narrative style – either adopting archetypes of plot and characterisation, or using styles such as *in medias res*. The struggle between what Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) refers to as “metanarratives” (such as the myth of progress and the idea of one true religion), and “micronarratives” where “people act out and exchange many different ways of understanding rather than relying on one overarching truth” (Fortier: 176) is pre-eminent in theatre for social justice in that characters are concerned with evaluating values in the social milieu and how these relate to their lives.

These stylistic choices are not prescriptive, but rather descriptive and are by no means exhaustive. They represent my reading of the generic forms theatre for social justice adopts. In this paper, we will analyse how the three plays pander to and employ the stylistic choices and what these choices do to their development.

Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi: A Narrative Enacted

Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi (further referred to as *Maua*) is a play written for the proscenium performance. The stage directions and presentation speak to a “formal” theatre setting. The pre-eminent style in it is the use of the oral narrative. *Maua* adopts the narrative form exemplified in *in media res*. The play opens with the narratives by Nyagachi and Gachono about their predicament as a result of the ethnic conflict. The immediacy of destitution, war, pain and suffering that one meets at the opening of the book is sustained throughout the play. *Maua* is a narrative enacted: the characters are always telling others stories of what happened to them. Indeed apart from the sixth scene where Nali confronts her father about the stockpiling of weapons (pg 58-63), the rest of the play consists of characters relating what happened to them, what they did or what they plan to do.

The second aspect of the use of the narrative is that the author employs stream of consciousness in Chebwe’s and Walila’s minds. It is used as a contestation in the present time – of social values and current scenarios. One of the key conceptual frameworks of narratives is the reflection of the thoughts of characters when they are faced with difficult situations that they have to mull over or make decisions on. In the play, the stream of consciousness, the retelling of the narrative, is presented in a number of ways. A key one is remembrance, for example where Tungai remembers his days in the military (pp 15, 41). Another is dramatic “projection” – a form of stream of consciousness where a character is not involved in what his stream of consciousness has been used to present. This is seen in Kabitho’s reliving of the Watange training to kill his people (17-19). We call it projection because Kabitho was married to a Watange wife – Cheptero – who supposedly left him due to his infidelity. The impression created is that Kabitho’s hatred for the Watange is the only reason he imagines and recreates this.

It is this same character, Kabitho, in whose mind the training of Watange young men happens. It is ironical that in this play the name of Wandiku is not mentioned as the target by the Watange warriors. It is notable that the remembrance does not happen in the mind of either Toiche or Chebwe. The two have been given saving graces: Toiche has discovered the lie about land traded by Chebwe as the reason to fight, and Chebwe has his wife Neche and daughter Nali who constantly undermine and check his evil. Kabitho on the other hand is alone (his wife and children are away) and thus his excesses of virulence are unchecked. That is maybe why he is using his seniority with his relatives, Waito and Tungai, to advance the anti-Watange agenda.

Another presentation of the stream of consciousness is the dramatization of internal conflict as seen in the tussle between Chebwe's "good spirit" and "evil spirit" on his role in the violence (pp 31 - 32). The preponderance of flashbacks and stream of consciousness presented in the form of play-in-a-play is a significant stylistic feature in the play.

The third aspect of the use of the narrative is the transposition to narratives of poesy and theatre artistry due to strife in the case of Nali and Waito. One gets the impression that the narrative subverts the dramatic: in what is supposed to be the "love scene" Waito and Nali are instead telling each other stories about the devastation of war – both in Lolomo and South Sudan. The place of poesy of love – relived through a flashback of their meeting (ironically in the dark after the bus they were travelling in broke down) – is overshadowed by the reality of their predicament. This is the exemplification of the how conflict is treated in the play. The urgency of portrayal of the impact of conflict, the destruction of life, the dismembering of persons is so great that the poet (Waito) is unable to share with Nali and he argues that he will have to finish writing a poem so that he can later explain. We can argue that Waito lacks the language, indeed the phraseology, to describe the *jinamizi* (horror) that he witnessed. We learn in this same scene that Nali, who is a performing artist, is unable to enjoy acting because of the trauma of seeing victims of ethnic clashes dumped in river Gera. (p52)

A second aspect of style in the play is how the characters are presented. As opposed to a representational mode, the characters in the play are flat. The characters are types and the depth of their lives is hidden from us by "purpose" for which they are intended by the author. The characters that have an inkling of humanity and/or positivity (Tungai, Waito and Nali) are consumed by mindless war and carnage that controls their lives.

Thirdly, the play's main conflict happens before it begins. The play opens with the denouement and/or tragic suffering of persons who have already been affected by the central conflict of the play – ethnic violence. It opens with characters already in an Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camp. We get the feel that the worst has passed (and indeed it has) and now they are left with the pain and reminiscences of the past. Consequently, there is nothing new that happens in the play. One finds that the play and the conflict is spent at the beginning and the characters just relive their dreams and horrors or in some cases, the extension of similar problems: the government ordering the IDP camp closed is a parallel to their being evicted out of their homes; the running away from the lorry taking them to Mikuyu province is parallel to their running away from the attackers at their homes.

Enrolling the audience does not happen in the text. In the one instance when Kabitho turns to the audience, he is the personification of a deracinated man fighting for his sanity. He is in a soliloquy after listening to the radio and he is bitter with the use of the radio and TV to lie about the status of the country and therefore turns to point at “someone in the audience” not to interact with them, but to rant about the state’s use of media to spread lies on non-existent peace (p6). The sarcasm in his vitriolic remarks is evident and that can be said to be the only reason he turned to the audience – to create difference and to signal the shift in the otherwise straightforward language of the play. In this utterance, Kabitho does not want to influence the audience or to seek their concurrence or negation of what he is saying. He instead is drumming to them that the situation is hopeless; indeed he is annoyed that they may be listening to the radio – which is the other character on stage – and not believing him. As such, the audience is not participating, it is observing, and being overwhelmed by the dire situation that the people of Lolomo North are visited with. By and large *Maua* is not different, in terms of dramatic presentation, from the traditional plays for the proscenium theatre.

Kanzala – A Contestation of Narratives

A critical reading of *Kanzala* unearths a presentational characterisation. My finding is that the characters are not necessarily unique people, but types. *Kanzala* is a parody of “Councillor” a powerful grassroots civic post in the Kenya of the 1990s. The character of Mama and her predicament in trying to wrest power from *Kanzala* is reminiscent of the struggle by women to get involved in politics against a patriarchal setup. Sweetie is a stereotype of a barmaid of the period who is treated by customers as part of the goods on sale. The elders and pastors are also presentational in refusing to bulge to the whims of the *Kanzala* on principle – drawn from their culture and religion respectively. Indeed in the play, everyone behaves their part and there are no surprises.

The play employs the narrator/facilitator/joker method of the Boalian Forum Theatre. The narrator is a talented person who introduces the narrative, the characters and some scenes. At the opening, the narrator, like the chorus in proscenium theatre, introduces the theme through a poem dedicated to Mother Africa, the land of black people that has been raped by colonialism and post-independence corruption and dictatorship. This sets the tempo for the narrative he tells to the audience about the public announcement by the leader of Zoza who declares that the ruling

party, Our People's Own Party (OPOP), would rule for a hundred years whereas the people of the country were yearning for change. The story is soon transformed into a role play by members of the audience who play children and parents/visitors on Kanzala's visit to a school named after him. In the role play, there is a clear subversion of civic education through the reframing of democracy as "obey and do as instructed". This becomes an "authoritative" meaning of democracy for the party (OPOP) and the audience, reduced to docile minions and hapless children, clap for the elucidation by the leader. The narrator is quick to assert his role by saying "Mimi ndiye mwalimu wa tamthilia" (I am the drama teacher) (p6) – a double edged statement that means he is the drama teacher in the school but also he is the "facilitator educator" in the theatre. He goes on to present a poem titled "democracy" in whose enactment, the "teaching" by Kanzala is debunked and exposed for the lie it is. The poem is about the search for freedom: the freedom to fly, the freedom for voice, the freedom to be free and how the search for freedom has been curtailed by the powerful elite – like Kanzala (p.7). In this way, the narrator becomes the owner of the narrative, the owner of the dramatic expose that would follow.

Having introduced the evil that bestrides Zoza, the narrator next gives a rendition of the hope in the love of the new generation characters – Joe and Winnie – whose love ultimately conquers the diabolical political contest between evil (as represented by Kanzala, the Ruler and OPOP) and positive social change (as represented by Mama). This is the last time we meet the narrator. So his role in the play is to introduce the context, the main characters and the conflict. In this case, the conflict is between hate and love.

Kanzala can be summed up as a contestation of narratives. The first contestation is of the narrative of power and conquest as presented by Kanzala (rich, powerful) versus the narratives of humane existence presented by Sweetie (poor, vulnerable). In their conversation, Sweetie represents the reasonable woman, self-respecting even when she is doing a hazardous and demeaning job. She asserts her humanity against the raw power of Kanzala and his henchmen and declares that no man would touch her without her willing it – despite the fact that she was a bar maid (p18). Throughout the play, Sweetie resists his advances and instead is in love with Mwalimu, the perceived weak and deranged teacher who is also the antithesis of Kanzala. Secondly, where Kanzala has sown hatred and plans to prevent the wedding of his son to Mama's daughter, Sweetie is the go to person for the fruition of their affair.

The second contestation is the family narratives of Kanzala (divorce and hatred) and that of Mama (love beyond death). When accosted by the church elder and the pastor about a reunion

with his wife, he threatens them with dire consequences and even rejects their blessings (p48). He also threatens to disown his son upon realising that he wants to marry Mama's daughter (p64). Mama on the other hand, though single, lost her husband through death, has kept the vow and opted to live with the memories of the love rather than marry another man who may disappoint her (p27). Her daughter is her family, and she would do anything to make her happy. When Winnie tells her that she is in love with Joe, she refuses to judge the boy by the standards of the evil wrought by his father. Instead, she wishes Winnie well and advises her to be careful and be sure of her heart.

The third narrative is the campaign narrative of Kanzala (power defeats challengers) and the campaign narrative of Mama (the good must guard against exploitation). The campaign slogan of Kanzala is the snake, complete with its poise to strike the opponent. In the scene where the two go to campaign in the field, they both tell stories to the audience. The stories take the narrative performance form in African culture: the declaration of the story, the opening formula and the adoption of archetypes from lore.

Kanzala weaves the story of how the party and the Ruler defeated the tunnel digging people who wanted to overthrow the government by clever means – emerging at statehouse. He narrates how ostensibly, God brought to them confusion (here alluding to the Tower of Babel story). This is ridicule to the political opposition by the ruling party. In the same breathe he ridicules the search for positions of leadership by women by appropriating the patriarchal narrative that, in Africa, women belong in the kitchen. Mama on the other hand narrates an adaptation of the story of unsuspecting merciful person (woman) who helps a stranded “good-looking” man cross a flooded river, not knowing that the person was an ogre and would refuse to dismount and stick his ogre nails on her neck. The counter narrative by Mama rests on the chthonic essence of womanhood: woman is the mother of man, the caregiver, the abused saviour of the “ogre-man”. She debunks the “prostitution” tag put on women who seek leadership. Kanzala's narrative is denigrating while Mama's narrative is humanising.

The play also employs the stream of consciousness as a technique for futuristic pitching of consequences of present action. In the scene – which appropriately happens in Sweetie's bar – Kanzala is visited in his waking dream by a being who shows him the future (p65-68). This future is a fruition of the bloodbath that the party has visited on the opposition in order to retain power. Kanzala hails this as the way of crushing the opposition and is happy that even if a blood river runs through the country, he and his ilk can go to live abroad. He is impervious to the irony

of this predicament. The future also shows a change in the running of government preceded by a national reconciliation dialogue conference, where revenge is abandoned and a new ethic of value based leadership instituted. Kanzala is shocked that the Ruler seems to have sanctioned such a thing and he gets unsettled. His world is hinged on the dictum of the Ruler, and the absence of the Ruler in the dream is unimaginable. At the end of the dream, he thinks that his “heart has stopped” and he is dead. It is after this dream that a bit of his humanity creeps back: he treats Sweetie like a human being and professes not to sexually assault her.

Symbolism in the text is at the level of representational characterisation. The play is set in a fictional country – Zoza – which is Kiswahili for “bring chaos”. As earlier stated, Kanzala parodies a councillor, and he is the child of “Matata” meaning chaos/suffering. Sweetie, the barmaid, is a parody of a loose woman. Mama represents women as well as social grounding, respectability and resilience. Joseph and Winnie are known by their English names as was trendy at the time – to signify their “cosmopolitan” nature and as young people who belong to a new age. The other characters are given role names: the Chief, the Pastor, the church elder, the community elders and the teacher.

Notwithstanding these features, the play is wordy with little or no “play”. In the first place, characters are talking about the presence or absence of civic values but, except for Kanzala, none demonstrate the necessary action to foment conflict and thus necessitate a resolution. The introduction of “kiumbe” (an apparition) in the dream of Kanzala, is a lazy way of creating an internal conflict for Kanzala (who has hitherto been plain evil) and thus forcing a change of heart and a semblance of social deliverance for him. After this, he attends the wedding, is remorseful about how he treated his wife and even Sweetie is seeing him as a nice human being worth of considering for a visit to her “statehouse”. (p77).

Secondly, the play pays little attention to the dramatisation of conflict. The opportunities for enhancement of conflict – the bar scene when Mwalimu calls Kanzala out, the scene when Sweetie flatly rejects Kanzala, the scene when the elders refuse to support Kanzala over Mama, the scene when the Pastor and church elder refuse to give blessings to Kanzala or even when Mama and Kanzala face each other in the campaigns – are wasted in civility and empty (inconsequential) and undramatic dialogues.

Before the Storm: A Narrative Untold

In respect to the basis for analysis set out, the play can be said not to employ storytelling. It also has a cast dialogue that is assigned to characters and thus textual fluidity is in doubt. We note thought that the seven scenes are organized like sketches of dramatic action which are enacted out by the characters in role. Although this is a methodology of theatre creation for community theatre, there is no evidence of this as the play was written as opposed to being workshopped.

In terms of presentational methodology, the conflicts are socially untenable and unjusticeable. The conflict between Mama and Dada, between Baba and Sani, between Baba and the Chief, and between Baba and Jerusha are built on flimsy grounds and are exaggerated and abandoned without sufficient depth. What starts as a reprimand by a father to a son who is staying out too late turns to a shouting match during which the father, ironically, storms out (p11). The son, when left talking to his mother, conjures images of blood thirsty devils and declares they have no home but a den of devil worship (p12). Dada and Sani join the group formed by Jerusha and take part in the plan to burn their own house for reasons that are untenable – more like the Raskolnikovian imperative in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* where the character became a victim of adopting nihilistic “incomplete” ideas “floating” in the air to murder an old woman (Mochulsky, p272). Dada accuses Mama, her mother, of extortion, theft, war mongering and other things (p41) without as much as an iota of evidence. Her vitriolic hate and accusations of devil worship to Mama have no merit whatsoever. The chief and Baba have been friends for long and their fall out is unmerited. Baba has even helped the chief's son to go to college abroad (p45). If we take it for granted that the Chief and Baba were supporting different political sides, or just that the Chief is doing his work as detailed by government, what justifies him to join a gang and don balaclava to go burn Baba's house when he is in the Chief's own jail?

Whereas we note that the conflicts are untenable, we also argue that the senselessness of the conflict, and its abandonment at critical times, inversely foregrounds the social justice agenda. As the audience, we are left with the hangover of wars unfought and conflicts unattended that make the social justice agenda more urgent. We are also contending that this may have been an unintended outcome of the theatre.

Although *Before the Storm's* form bespeaks a proscenium presentation, the play, like most improvisational drama, has minimal stage directions and/or dramatisation of the action. The play

is full of “preaching” by characters. Though talking to others, their speeches take the form of soliloquies – the characters talk for long without interruption as though they are advancing a thesis or proffering an argument. This robs the play of essential theatricity. What complicates this is that some of the passages are actually regurgitations of “civic education modules” on social analysis (pp17-18) the rights to assembly, (p37) the right to participation (pp35-36), voter registration (pp30-31), the precepts of democracy (pp33-34), the right to property (pp43-45), and the respect for diversity (p48). This decreases the tempo of the play and style is sacrificed at the altar of messagism. The dialogue is “untheatrical” – plain, direct and pedagogic.

We note also that the entry and exit of characters is dramatically unmotivated – characters bump on each by accident and start or participate in conversations that are out of sync with their character and setting. The first line is a classic example. Baba and Mama are in the sitting room and from the blue, Baba says: “My dear, you look as good as new...”, (1). This statement is completely unmotivated and out of context since we have hardly met them and we do not know their ages or their status in life. Still in the first scene, when the daughter enters – coming from town/post office, Mama asks about the mail and in the same breathe brings up the story of chief’s son (Dada’s fiancé) (p4). This story has just been discussed between Mama and Baba and Dada was neither aware of nor does she get prepared for it by the mother. Most of the dialogue is structured this way and one feels that the characters are fleeting in and out of the dramatic space like phantoms. During the quarrel with his son in Scene 2, Baba storms out at the height of it and waltzes back in as Sani talks to Mama declaring that they have something to talk about and the son should start “shooting straight away” (p13). When Sani says that he has nothing to say, the topic dies and Baba starts a conversation with Mama about the prophetess. By the time they all exit, the father-son talk has been abandoned and there is no hint of what nature it was. This kind of barging in and out of the dramatic space purposelessly weakens the play tremendously.

Naming, like is characteristic of theatre for social justice where role referencing is the *modus operandi*, reflects representational characterisation. Mama (mother) Baba (father) Dada (sister) Sani (son) Mtu (person), Kijana (boy), Man (a man) and Chief (chief) are used both as proper nouns as well as adjectival referents. Apart from the prophetess named Jerusha (a biblical allusion to the daughter of Zadok, the priest – and the mother of King Jotham whose father, Uzziah, had been struck with leprosy for daring burn incense at the alter whereas he was not a priest), and Dada – whose real name is Nehanda (p56) – an allusion of the royal “mudzimu” – a

“female” spirit among the Shona of Zimbabwe, all the other characters have no symbolic or other depth.

The play therefore realizes little theatrical merit since conflicts are unmotivated and superficial – a narrative untold. Those that are genuine are abandoned by characters exiting when the action “is about to begin”. What grips the reader of the play is the fact that there is no storm: this is a powerful symbol which is, in a way, a misplaced hyperbole. The image presupposes strong winds – maybe a whirlwind, gathered clouds, a dark hue over the earth and a heavy downpour that drenches the land unexpectedly. None of these things are present in the play – literally. The ending also seems contrived and one gets a feel that the issues that have been raised have not been addressed but the characters have to hug to get the final bow, the conflicts or betrayals that have been hinted on or have been “betrayed”, are left unattended.

Conclusion

The three plays may not fit in the definitive categorisations of the theatre. They are neither tragedies nor comedies or any of the in-between typologies of proscenium theatre, nor are they community theatre pieces. They are the products of the practitioners of one tradition “forced” to pander to the dynamics of another. Structurally, all three have a linear structure: a fallout of parents over non personal issues (politics and ethnic bigotry); the weak development of conflict – none of the supposed protagonists has a socially meritable case; violence – or the threat of it – is ever present and the love and eventual marriage (or supposition in the case of *Before the Storm*) of the children is the form of “conflict resolution” adopted. Whereas we agree that they are largely proscenium theatrical pieces, popular and community theatre forms such as storytelling, use of facilitator, audience participation etc are employed as techniques. There is centrality of presentational narratives and stories. The plays are also overly didactic – educating us on human rights, international protocols, constitutionalism, civic responsibility and peace. We conclude that their exigency has compromised their style and theatrical potency.

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