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Accounting for Postmodernist Tendencies in Contemporary African Plays: A Study of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ngugi WA Thiong'o and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

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Abstract

The concept of postmodernism is acknowledged as a Western creation. Postmodernism in Western context often engages with aesthetic playfulness, scepticism, and metanarratives. However, African playwrights have adopted some postmodernist features into their plays for political resistance, social critique and retelling of Africa's history. This paper attempts to examine how postmodernist tendencies are incorporated into contemporary African plays. Using an analytical and comparative approach, this paper examines Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* to account for how African playwrights incorporate postmodernist techniques in their plays. These two selected plays represent two distinct regions of Africa – West Africa and East Africa as sample regional study. One of the leading voices in Postmodernism, Hutcheon (1989) observes that postmodernism as a concept of study has been ignored by critics because of its "complex paradigmatic quality". There are little or few research works on this concept. This paper as a result offers a good exposition and contribution to the study of the concept of postmodernism. It explores such elements of postmodernism as historiographic metafiction, fragmentation, deconstruction and intertextuality to contribute to the wide view of postmodernism.

Key Words: African drama, Postmodernism, Historiographic metafiction, fragmentation, Grand narrative.

Introduction

Contemporary African drama has undergone several transformations. This range from precolonial oral traditions to colonial era

plays which were influenced by Western dramaturgy, and later to post-independence theatre characterized by socio-political engagements. Contemporary African plays

are dramatic works written by African playwrights from the mid-20th century to the present day. African plays produced in this period reflect the diverse experiences, cultures, and histories of the African continent. Some of the notable features explored in contemporary African plays are characterised by the use of indigenous languages and cultural practices such as myths, ritual and festivals. Cultural revitalization and preservation of the African society's identity and economy, belongings in the postcolonial era, social justice and human rights struggle and globalization impact on the African ecology, form the discourse of contemporary African plays.

One of the tendencies that is crucial to contemporary African plays is the inculcation of postmodernist techniques to challenge historical narratives, power structures, and traditional storytelling. Postmodernism is the development of mass culture. In African drama, Postmodernist tendencies manifest through unconventional storytelling techniques, self-referencing, shifting perspective and the interrogation of history. This paper examines how these elements appear in selected contemporary African plays and how playwrights use postmodernist techniques to reshape narratives about identity, history, culture and

resistance to the legacies of colonialism. Two relevant plays from two distinct regions of Africa-West and East Africa have been selected to address the following critical questions.

How do contemporary African dramatists adopt postmodernist tendencies to serve political and historical purposes?

What is the significance of postmodernist elements to contemporary African plays?

How do these plays challenge traditional narratives about history, power and identity?

In what ways do character speeches and dialogues reflect postmodernist tendencies?

How do postmodernist tendencies manifest in selected contemporary African plays?

To explore the above critical research questions, this paper focuses on *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi and Micere Mugo. These two plays were selected based on their engagements with postmodernist tendencies. It analyses character speeches and dialogues to illustrate postmodernist tendencies while also considering historical, cultural and political contexts. Methodologically, this paper employs textual analysis of the selected plays using detailed textual evaluation of dialogues

and speeches to identity postmodernist techniques. The plays are situated within their socio-political and historical background to understand their thematic concerns. It draws insights from literary criticism, history and performance studies and then, makes a comparative analysis where it examines the similarities and differences in the use of postmodernist techniques between the selected plays.

2. Postmodernism as a Concept and its General Overview

Postmodernism according to the Oxford dictionary of language is a late 20th century style and concept in the arts, architecture and criticism which represents a departure from modernism and is characterised by the self-conscious use of earlier styles and conventions, mixing of different artistic styles. It is a style of movement in the arts that aims to depart from classical and traditional forms. It is aimed at modifying traditional beliefs in accordance with modern ideas. Hutcheon in her "Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History" argues that the term postmodernism itself is a contradictory phenomenon in the sense that it uses and abuses, installs and subverts the very concept it challenges - be it in architecture, paintings, literature, sculpture,

film, dance, philosophy, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, linguistics or historiography.

It is argued that postmodernism cannot be used in synonym to contemporariness because it does not describe an international cultural phenomenon as it is primarily European and American (North and South). This is because the concept of postmodernism is largely Anglo-American (Suleiman 1985). Hutcheon, on her part, defined postmodernism as "The presence of the past". Given that her definition claims that this presence of the past is not a nostalgic return, but a critical revisiting, and ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society, recalling of a critical shared vocabulary.

While Hutcheon argues that writers of postmodernism like Eagleton (1985), Jameson (1984) and Newman (1985) failed to give a precise definition of postmodernism, that they rather leave us guessing what it means that is being called postmodernism. Stuart (2001.P.3) on his part observed that "Jean Francois Leotard's book, *The Postmodern Condition.: A Report on knowledge* (1979) is regarded as the most powerful theoretical expression of postmodernism" According to Lyotard, Postmodernism is an "incredulity to metanarratives ". As perceived by Lyotard, postmodernist theories challenge traditional

notions of perspective, especially in narratives. Based on his view, African playwrights have lost faith in grand theories or ideologies that claim to explain Africa. He opines that a postmodernist writer is in the position of a philosopher. This is because the text he writes and the work he produces are not principally governed by pre-established rules and they cannot be judged based on a determining judgement simply by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Larry, McLafferty 1982;264) sees postmodernism as both metafiction and self-reflexive. To McLafferty, "it has become a kind of model for the contemporary writer, being self-conscious about its literary heritage and about the limits of mimesis... but yet managing to reconnect its readers to the world outside the page" (1982; 264).

African critics such as Nnolim argue that African writers should embrace a global outlook and not limit themselves to traditional African themes and forms. Nnolim sees postmodernism as a way to transcend the complexes of the past and engage with contemporary global issues. Emmanuel Obiechiena, on his part highlights the connection between postmodernism aesthetics and the expression of cultural differences in African literature. He argues that the fragmented and

hybrid nature of postmodernism reflects the diverse experiences and influences that have shaped African identities. Evan Maina Mwangi agrees that postmodernism in African literature, especially drama, emerged as a response to the changing social and cultural issues. He sees it as a way to engage with the complexities of globalization and the understanding of identity in the contemporary world.

Techniques to Identifying Postmodernist Tendencies

Among the notable contributors to the study of postmodernism similar theories or features have been mentioned by them under which postmodernism can be explored in contemporary plays. Postmodernism has deep roots in the present human condition. It highlights the possibility of man being able to relate present social, historical and existential realities to past events or narratives. One of the popular techniques or features of postmodernism is historiographic metafiction propounded by Linda Hutcheon. It incorporates all the domains of history and fiction as human constructs. It describes postmodern works that blend historical narratives with fictional techniques. Metafiction, another element of postmodernism, enables the rethinking and

reworking of the forms and contents of the past. Metafiction as a concept was popularised by the French philosopher, Jean Francois Lyotard in 1979. It implies the use of a story to tell a story using the bigger story to explain other little stories.

Metafiction is a postmodern theory that attempts to make sense out of complex realities by subsuming them under a single, all-encompassing narrative structure. Metafiction according to Lyotard explains reality, history and human experience. This is exemplified in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* where the bigger story of colonialism is East Africa Kenya in particular is used to re-enact the false narrative behind Dedan Kimathi a Mau Mau leader. More so, when a play draws attention to its own theoretical nature by having characters acknowledging the audience during performance, it is said to be meta-theatrical. In meta-theatre, a character in a play acknowledges the presence of the audience and addresses them on the unfolding events in the play. This action breaks the imaginary barrier that exists between the audience and the actors in the fictional world for the sake of dramatic effects. It should be noted that historiographic metafiction does not reject historical narratives but rather it explores and

rejects the story constructed and offers to give its own reconstruction. This is where subversion of grand narratives comes in. Subversion of grand narratives as a postmodernist tendency actively undermines or challenges established norms, values or power structures within a play. Subversion presents alternative perspectives and defies expectations. It subverts grand narratives by highlighting the limitations of past historical records and championing diverse perspectives. To subvert a grand narrative is to go contrary to a story that is widely accepted and then offers a different view. It usually depicts marginalized characters who resist dominant power structure by presenting alternative historic narratives.

Contemporary African Playwrights like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Micere Mugo, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Athol Fugard, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, J.P. Clark, Hubert Ogunde, Bode Sowande, Osonye Tess Onwueme, Ferdinand Kwasi Fianwoo, Tawfiq el-Hakim to mention but a few have debunked the Whiteman's narratives of the African people. For instance, the colonials have globally emphasised Western superiority and the inferiority of the rest of the world. The implication of this is that the stories that describe Africa are stories that

depict the continent as primitive, uncivilized, and un-progressive. Hence, contemporary African plays employ the techniques of subversion, to retell the African story from African people's perspective.

Pertinent to modernism is fragmentation and nonlinear narratives which are the techniques of narration where a story is grouped or enacted into several disjointed scenes to reflect the complex chaotic nature of modern life. Fragmentation enables events to be represented in a nonlinear narrative with multiple angles or perspectives. Fragmentation challenges traditional methods of telling story or enacting plays by inventing complex characters to satirize or critique a more complex reality. This technique is evident in many contemporary African plays, where time, space, and events are often disrupted to challenge traditional forms of storytelling.

4 Post-Modernist Tendencies in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*:

Wole Soyinka, born Akinwade Oluwole Soyinka into a Yoruba family in Abeokuta Ogun State on 13th July 1934, is one of the most influential play wrights in Africa. Soyinka is the first writer in Africa to be awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in

Literature. He studied English Literature, Greek and Western history at the University College in Ibadan, an affiliate of the University of London. Soyinka has received global recognition as a prominent playwright, poet and critic. His works are usually a blend of European theatrical traditions with those of his Yoruba cultural heritage. Most of his works satirize the political tensions arising from recent post-colonial independence. Soyinka is notable for his critique on Leopold Senghor's Negritude movement as a nostalgic and indiscriminate glorification of the black African past that ignores the potential benefits of modernisation. According to Soyinka "A Tiger does not proclaim its Tigritude, he pounces" likewise in *Death and the King's Horseman* he asserts that "The elephant trails no tethering rope that king is not yet crowned, who will peg an elephant". His political speeches criticised the cult of personality and the corruption in African dictatorship government. His works, include *The Swamp Dwellers* (1950). *The Lion and the Jewel* *The Trials of Brother Jero*, *A Dance of Forest* (1960), *The Strong Breed* (1964), *Kogi's Harvest* (1960), *The Road* (1965) *Madmen and Specialists* (1970), *Death and The King's Horseman* (1975) etc. He has also written poetry collections

and Essays some of which are "Towards a True Theatre" (1962), "Culture in Transition" (1963), "Art, Dialogue and Outrage, Essays on Literature and Culture", "From Drama and the African world view". (1976). His popular memoirs include "The Man Died: Prison Notes" (1971), "Ake: The Years of Childhood" (1981), "You Must Set Forth at Dawn" (2006) etc. In 1988 he became a Professor of African Studies and Theatre Art at Cornell University. Remarkably, he founded a theatrical group called the Guerrilla Unit. Soyinka has claimed that his works are influenced by the Yoruba deity "Ogun".

In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* he challenges the traditional Yoruba myth of the 'King's Horseman'. He questions the notion of a fixed and essentialized cultural identity. Thematically, the play emphasises the conflict between traditional Yoruba practices and British colonial beliefs. In Yoruba culture when a king dies, it is the responsibility of his horsemen, Elesin, to commit ritual suicide to accompany the king to the afterlife. This in Yoruba culture is highly regarded and signifies tradition for both the king and the horseman. As the play unfolds, Elesin as the King's Horseman prepares for the ritual. He revels in the excitement of his duty, showing deep

understanding of the cultural significance of his action. However, his intentions are complicated by a series of interactions with other characters, including Pilkings, the colonial officer and Iyaloja, the woman he intends to marry. The play's structure itself is a reflection of a postmodern fragmentation, shifting between the Yoruba world community and the colonial administration.

Again, intertextuality as a defining feature of postmodernism is evident in Soyinka's incorporation of Yoruba cosmology, mythology and ritualistic traditions. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the play draws from historical events but transforms them into a myth-historical framework, resisting Eurocentric historiography, Elesin, the protagonist, embodies the cyclical nature of Yoruba existence where life and death are interconnected. By structuring the play within a metaphysical world view, Soyinka disrupts linear historical narratives, and asserts indigenous limitation of the laws of nature. According to Praise-Singer "The King's death is not just a death, it is the end of an era". While Elesin keeps rejecting this death that he must die. The Praise Singer tells Elesin that in the time of past Elesins "the world was never tilted from its groove; it shall not be in yours". Yet, Elesin keeps repeating "the gods said no" as a sign of

rejection of the traditional Yoruba culture. Though Elesin recognises his role when he says "I am the one who must follow the king into the abyss" the colonial officer regards it as a barbaric practice which must not be allowed to continue. Pilkings' remarks it as some strange customs they have "that it seems because the king is dead some important chief has to commit suicide". This clash of culture questions reality and challenges traditional notions, it questions the notion of a single dominant culture. By extension, *Death and The King's Horseman* employs postmodern tendencies of intertextuality and Yoruba cosmology, nonlinear narratives and temporal disruption and subversion of colonial discourse. Pilkings, the district officer, embodies the ignorance of colonial authority and also fails to understand the Yoruba rituals. Olunde the eldest son of Elesin reflects the postmodernist rejection of grand narratives. As opposed to the narrative that the colonialist did damage to African culture, Olunde tells Jane, the wife of the district officer that "I found your people quite admirable in many ways".

One crucial characteristic of postmodernism is the use of irony and the reversal of power. Postmodernism tends to state the opposite of what one means in terms of

action, events or situations. Irony in this regard is sometimes used to create humour, elicit sympathy for characters, give a strong satisfying twist, tie various elements to a central theme or moral and build or develop a character either the hero or other characters. Irony is when the actual meaning of a word is the opposite of what is stated. In *Death*, Olunde receives a cable informing him of the king's death ironically he returns home to bury his father instead of the king. "All it said was, our king is dead. But I know I had to return home at once so as to bury my father". Jane, a British citizen, seems not to comprehend how Olunde, Elesin's son who had an excellent protection for travelling in the same convoy as the Prince could not extend the same protection to his father. "But you don't think your father is also entitled to whatever protection is available to him?" (53). The dialogue that ensues is a postmodernist tendency that subverts colonial discourse. By juxtaposing Yoruba and British world views, Soyinka expresses the limits of colonial epistemology. Olunde for example tells Jane when he says "Mrs Pilkings, whatever we do, we never suggest that a thing is the opposite of what it really is. In your newsreels, I heard defeats, thorough, murderous defeats described as

strategic victories''. On the contrary, Jane also tells Olunde,

“How can you be callous? So unfeeling!

You announce your father's own death like a surgeon

looking down on some strange ... stranger's body.

You are just like a savage like all the rest''(55). Elesin also arguably tells Pilkings that the world is not at peace. You have shattered the peace of the world forever.

Given the statement above from the character Jane, Soyinka tends to oppose the grand narrative in postmodern tendencies, embracing irony, complexity and contradiction. The above dialogue between Jane and Olunde serves as a conflict of interest between traditional Yoruba culture and colonialism. Soyinka is trying to say that when as Africans, we try to retell our own story, we should not totally condemn Western cultures. This he showcases when he said through AIDE- DE-CAMP that “these natives put suit on and they act high opinion of themselves. To me Soyinka seems to be neither here nor there trying to raise up a debate about the superiority of the two cultures”. Isidore Diala in his “Wole

Soyinka and the Romantic Tradition'' observes that:

“but even much of Soyinka's creative writing is equally self-consciously counter-hegemonic, articulating the urgent preoccupation of the postcolonial artist as well as foregrounding the peculiar pressure acting on his or her consciousness and work”.

4.1 Postmodernist Tendencies in the Trial of Dedan Kimathi

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is one of the most leading voices in East Africa whose novels and plays have challenged the negative influence of Western presence on the African continent. He is well known for his novels, *Weep Not, Child*, *Devil on the Cross*, *Petals of Blood*, *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, etc. Almost all his works are a poignant critique of the devastation caused on the African soil by the foreigners invaders. Micere Githega Mugo on her own was a lecturer in the literature Department at The University of Nairobi. She is the author of a play, *The Long Illness of ex-chief Kiti*, a book of criticism *visions of African*, and a collection of poetry titled *My People Sing*. She and Ngugi are the co-authors of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi employs postmodernist's meta-theatrical techniques

to challenge the colonial historiography that demonized the Mau-Mau leader. The play presents multiple versions of Kimathi's trial. It refused a singular historic narrative of the colonialists against Kenyan history. *The Trial of Kimathi* by the British colonial authorities, serves as a symbol of the resistance and resilience of the Kenyan people in the face of colonialism. One of the key features of postmodernist literature is the rejection of grand-narratives. In the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Ngugi and Mugo subvert the dominant narratives of colonial history. Based on the stories the colonials from the west portray against Africans, Ngugi objects this notion and exposes the colonialists an exploitative of the indigenous colonized people. According to woman in the play "It is the same old story. Everywhere" But to subvert this grand narrative, Ngugi and Mugo go further to retell through woman that:

"Our people ... tearing one another... and all because of the crumbs thrown at them by the exploiting foreigners. Our own food eaten and leftovers thrown to us in our own land, where we should have the whole share. We buy wood from our own forests; sweat on our own soil for the profit of our oppressors!" As woman adds further which is perceived as the new narrative that "Kimathi's teaching is: unite, drive out the enemy and control your own

riches, enjoy the fruit of your sweat – Khaldeh and Bami-Khair in their essay on "Post-colonial Counter Memory" observe the British portrayal of Kimathi as a hated coward terrorist among Kenyans. However, on the contrary Ngugi and Mugo dramatize their national hero throughout the play as a respectful leader who is loved by his people. Apparently, the soldiers who are instructed to capture the Mau, Mau rebels observe the people's love for Kimathi, This is remarked by the first soldier in his speech "... Kimathi is a hero to the people, They love him like anything.."

Consequent upon this, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* employs meta-theatrical techniques to challenge the colonial historiography that demonized the Mau Man header. The play presents multiple versions of Kimathi's trial. Refusing a singular historical narrative. Ngugi and Mugo's reflection of their own version of the narrative aligns with the postmodernist element of historical objectivity. It reinforces the idea that history is a construct shaped by power relations. Moreover, Ngugi and Mugo deploy the postmodernist intertextuality feature, a theory coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966. Through the theory of intertextuality, Ngugi and Mugo interpret texts against historical records to form another narrative out of past narratives. Again all the stories built around Kimathi in the play is a

deconstruction of heroism, a postmodern trait that examines stable identities Kimathi is not presented as a singular heroic figure, but a symbol shaped by collective resistance. As Kimathi notes 'My life is our people struggling, fighting

In addition, unlike traditional historical plays that focus on a single protagonist. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* discriminates heroism across multiple characters. The play foregrounds anonymous revolutionaries. It represents history as a collective process rather than an individual centred narrative. For instance, woman in the play is seen as a revolutionary hero. Kimathi extols her revolutionary prowess when he says; 'do you see this woman? How many tasks has she performed within complaint... How many people has she snatched from jails, from colonial jaws of death? ... When this struggle is over, we shall erect at all the city corners monuments to our women. Their courage and dedication to our struggle' (pg 73). By implication Ngugi and Mugo recognise the role of women in revolutionary struggle, a feminist theory of postmodernism. This feminist submissiveness is portrayed in page 10 of the play. Johnie, a soldier armed with a gun, is tensed around woman. Woman throughout, her actions are under control, her body and

mind are fully alert. Fearless determination and a spirit of daring is a character, role and situations. In her dialogue with the soldier, she exclaims 'Imagine, I would never have believed it. A Whiteman. A soldier, Afraid ...'. We are told that as Johnny takes woman's banana, he tries to hide his earlier fears. He admits that woman looks like a Mau Mau' like one of them Kimathi women (pg10)

5. Comparative Analysis of Both Plays:

Remarkably, both plays employ intertextuality. They both draw from historical and indigenous sources to reconstruct past narratives. Both *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Trial of Dedan Kimathi* did not follow a linear approach to storytelling, which is an attempt to resist Eurocentric temporality. They both disrupt conventional heroism, thereby presenting their protagonists as complex figures influenced by cultural and political forces.

Additionally, both plays adopt polyvocality and fragmented storytelling that shifts between different perspectives from colonial officials to freedom fighters in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and from colonial to Yoruba traditional mythology in *Death and the King's Horseman*. Although the two plays

share similar postmodernist aesthetics, they are also different deployment of these tendencies. Soyinka on his part strongly deploys myth and ritual, Ngugi and Mugo deploy didactic approach to engage the audience in revolutionary discourse.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation:

Conclusively, *Death and The King's Horseman* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* employ or demonstrate the use of postmodernism tendencies. Through their subversion of grand narratives, intertextuality, fragmentation, deconstruction, historiographic metafiction and met theatrical devices, both playwright draw attention to correct the general falsehood behind a previously told story. It must be noted that Kimathi is used in the play not really as a leader against colonialism struggle, but as a leader against neo-colonialism whose struggle has relevance for the contemporary fight against colonialism. The enemies combated in the play are not only colonialists, but also black successors who came to be agents of imperialism. In *Death and The King's Horseman*, Elesin, not the district officer, is represented as a human failure of the symbolism he choruses. At the beginning of the play, we see him as a symbol of Yoruba

and African metaphysical representation where he acknowledges the necessity of his role. However, despite Elesin's vocal nature and how he enthusiastically approaches the market place, the setting of his sacrifice, he discovers that he is impotent. That is the moment he discovers his heretical mistake.

In summary, postmodernist tendencies in African drama is a relatively new phenomenon, already gaining significant impact on the way that African plays are written and performed. Generally, Postmodernist Tendencies in African plays often reject grand narratives or modernism, such as the belief in universal truth, instead, embracing a more fragmented subjective view of the world. Emphasises of identity and difference which celebrate the diversity of African culture. It incorporates elements of Traditional African performance, such as music, dance and storytelling. It addresses issues of colonialism, neo colonialism, globalization and social justice. It also draws attention to the ways in which theatre can be used to construct and challenge reality.

Finally, the two plays are a reflection of the thematic concerns of identity, colonial legacy and resistance through the use of multiple voices and perspectives that challenge traditional narratives. In the light of future

works on postmodernist tendencies in contemporary African plays, since this work explores postmodernist tendencies in two selected place from two distinct African regions, this paper recommends other researcher to examine the role of gender in postmodernist African plays, with particular reference to works by female playwrights. Again this paper further recommends other researchers to explore a comparative study between African and Western postmodernist plays. This can further contextualise the distinctiveness of African postmodernist tendencies. Hence by exploring and accounting for postmodernist aesthetics in contemporary African plays, this paper contributes to ongoing discourse on the intersection of history, ideology and theatrical viewpoints in African drama

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