NAVIGATING THE WORLDS OF JOHN RUGANDA'S *THE BURDENS* AND *BLACK MAMBA*

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Abstract

Elam contends that the world of drama is constructed relative to the world of actuality, which the performer and spectator of drama inhabit. He says the dramatic world "is a spatio-temporal elsewhere represented as though actually present for the audience" but it is counterfactual; not real or factual (Elam, 1987, p.99). The interpretation of the dramatic world, therefore, is based on the conventionality of the world of actuality. This is to say that we access the world of drama from the position of the world of actuality. "The spectator assumes that the represented world, unless otherwise indicated, will obey the logical and physical laws of his own world," (p. 104). The spectator, it is assumed, enjoys a shared semantic and cultural context with the dramatis personae of the dramatic world. This obtains because the semantic and cultural interactions that are observed in the dramatic world are modeled on those of the world of actuality. It is this shsred cultural awareness and socialization of the individual that enable the spectator to fill in the gaps that exist in the world of drama in order to make the same world complete and meaningful. This paper explores how past experiences of characters in John Ruganda's plays, ***The Burdens*** *and* ***Black Mamba****,bring into perspective the bearing their past has on their present and future.*

Key Words: Worlds, Dramatis Persona, Actuality, Performer, Spectator, Representation

Introduction

The elements of space and time are crucial in locating events in geographical and historical perspectives in the world of drama. Whereas the events of drama belong to the fictive world, their perception and interpretation is analogous to the realization of happenings in the human world. Elam (1987) contends that the world of drama is constructed relative to the world of actuality, which the performer and spectator of drama inhabit. The dramatic world "is a spatio-temporal elsewhere represented as though actually present for the audience" but it is counterfactual (p.99). The interpretation of the dramatic world, therefore, is based on the conventionality of the world of actuality. This is to say that we access the world of drama from the position of the world of reality. "The spectator assumes that the represented world, unless otherwise indicated, will obey the logical and physical laws of his own world," (p.104). When this does not happen then the represented world becomes foregrounded and draws attention to itself requiring the recipient of the drama to decipher the implication. The spectator, it is assumed, enjoys a shared semantic and cultural context with the *dramatis*

personae of the dramatic world and this is what makes that world intelligible. Guido Ferraro in an article titled, "Analogical Associations in the frame of a "Neoclassical" Semiotic Theory" posits that in trying to make meaning out of life, we rely on chains of events known as scripts for analogical understanding. He claims, "events are linked together in a sequence, this allows us to go back logically, passing from a link in the chain to another …" (Ferraro, 2010, p.72). He equates this link to a syntagmatic chain in semiotics and contends that, "the form of the chain allows to both go upstream, from the effect to the cause … or go downstream from the cause to the effect …." (p.72). It is this link that makes the reader or spectator bend backwards to put events of drama in a time perspective that helps to correlate and comprehend the fragmented occurrences of the dramatic world. Cleante Brooks in yet another article on the fragmented nature of literary texts argues that the elements of a text are related to each other like the parts of a growing plant, with each needing the other for comprehension (Brooks in Keesey1998, p. 81)

The world of drama exists *in media res* as the performer gives life to it, and as it comes into being during performance its "history" and social milieu are established. The actor shares with the audience the character's spatio-temporal circumstance by enacting, describing or referring to the conditions of this world. "Dramatic worlds, then, are revealed through the persons, actions and statements which make them up…" (Elam, 1987, p. 112). The audience is largely shown this world by the actor through a process of ostention. Elam calls this element of constructing and /or reconstructing the dramatic world by reference the principle of reflexivity. Kerby (1991) refers to it as emplotment. He says, "it is in and through various forms of narrative emplotment that our lives – and thereby our very selves – attain meaning" (p.4).

Drama as an art form is constructed of segments that constitute the whole(Pfister, 1988). These segments need to be re-ordered to create the larger narrative. The segments are realized by way of contemplation of aspects of technique that create strands of moments in the lives of characters. These moments and events therein constitute dramatic worlds that are real for the *dramatis personae*.These worlds differ, first, from the world of reality in the sense that they are given wholes while the former is constantly changing. However, the dramatic world bears semblance to the world of reality only insofar as it obeys the order of things as they are in reality. This order can only be realized in the world of drama by paying cognizance to the mimetic time locus of "here-and-now" of performance. This phenomenon of the dramatic text demands that the reader or spectator constructs the larger narrative of the play by re-ordering the parts into meaningful logical patterns. It is the reader's ability to string together the segments into a meaningful whole that ultimately the whole enables him or her to comprehend what the drama is about. The various worlds conjured up from the activities of the dramatis personae constitute the larger overall world of the drama.

Ruganda's plays are characterized by many layers of presentation and representation that reveal different worlds both spatially and across time. These worlds are realized through

several dramatic techniques including reminiscence, narration, role-play, projection and surrealism that result in foregrounding**.** Through the techniques, the charactersreconstruct their past lives and portray lives of other characters-in-absentia that are significant to the understanding of the plays. The images created turn out in fact to be the role-playing characters' attitudinal imaging of the past and a conjuration of the absent characters'being and projection of the future. These images are only accurate to the extent of the information supplied and context created by the role-playing, narrating, and dreaming or hallucinating characters' idiosyncrasies. They are mediated images of worlds only known to the characters constructing or recreating them.

Wamala and Tinka's Glorious Past in *The Burdens*

In Ruganda's plays, characters keep looking back at their past in order to rationalize their present and conjure up their future. His plays operate in a flux of worlds at different times of the characters' lives, which are referentiallydefined and reconstructed in spatio-temporal terms by the characters from their experience or imagination. The characters are aware of their past from "their experience" but they can only imagine "the future" basing on their "past" and "present". This reconstruction of the past and projection of the future by the characters is an attempt to come to terms with their current plights that they find alienating and frustrating. In *The Burdens*we meet Wamala after he has served two years of jail and has been paroled by the head of state after being convicted of treason. At this juncture, Wamala is too disgraced and ashamed to face those in high circles; whom he fraternized with while serving in the cabinet. After jail, he has to come to terms with slum life, to which he has been consigned, a reality he finds too hard to bear. Finding himself ostracized by those he considered to be his friends, he hibernates into the Republic Bar where he can only be tolerated by fellow habitué drunks. Nonetheless, he still harbours the dream of becoming a "somebody" if and when he gets a job or substantial money.

Wamala finds himself in a new world of squalor and deprivation that can only be explained from his past. It is this past that he and his wife, Tinka, keep referring to and reminiscing about, wishing they could go back. Through role-play, narration and description, the two characters abundantly reconstruct their past, revealing a life of opulence and ostentatious consumption. They have been up there rubbing shoulders with the high and mighty but now they have to contend with the lowly riff-raff that they despise while in high society. Unable to come to terms with the new plight, all they can do is blame each other for their fall from the Garden of Eden.

The constant nostalgic glances and the delusion of a better future is not only frustrating but also blinds them to the fact of their culpability in their suffering. Tinka looks back and blames Wamala entirely for destroying the family's fortunes, while Wamala, on the other hand, blames Tinka for bringing him down, and the Yankees for cheating him they would help him clinch the presidency.From their reminiscences it is apparent thateach harbours ulterior motives at the beginning of their relationship. Tinka put herself strategically in

Wamala's path so as to use him to ascend to a life of high society while Wamala uses Tinkafor political expediency. Wamala distinguishes himself as a happy-go-lucky fellow and an opportunist who takes advantage of Tinka's naivety, her father's generosity and his party's conflict with the Catholic Church to achieve his political agenda. The two have lived a life vanity and deceit, each hoping to outdo the other only for the both of them to crumble down together.

It is this world of insincerity and dishonesty in their initial relationship that leads both characters into their present frustration. Previously a nun, Tinka escapes the spiritual world of celibacy, self-denial and willing servanthood to humanity prescribed by the church and opts for the precarious and illusive secular world of affluence, which she prospects to realize through Wamala. On his part, Wamala, after his first luck of being appointed to high office on political expediency becomes too complacent and blinded by his whim of luck, which he attempts to push a bit too far, and ends up plummeting beyond where he begun. Each of the characters' dream worlds is thus shattered in their pursuit of the illusory life of ostentation. After jail Wamala becomes a marked man; no person wants to interact with a man convicted of attempted treason, especially if that person still enjoys privileges from the same government. The vanity of ostentation that characterizes Wamala and Tinka's past world and the desire to keep to its standards continues to dictate their future. Like in the famous Kiswahili saying, "*Nyanihajionikundule"* (A baboon does not see its scarred arse), Wamala and Tinka blame each other and other people for their downfall; but they fail to see their role in the whole misfortune of their changing fortunes.

They persist in the questfor this world blinded to the fact of its coming to an end. It is a life of self-deceit, fraught with hypocrisy that they describe in the revelry and carousing that attends their wedding reception. On this occasion self-proclaimed humanists in the name of university dons pretend to condemn the excesses of such life but partake of it lavishly. Ethically, the attitude projected by the two protagonists is not only selfish and individualistic, but also vulgar. It is the life of a privileged few who will go to any length to thwart any attempt to curtail their hold on the organs of power and authority. Having tasted the sweetness of power Wamala overreaches himself in wanting to displace those he perceives to be standing in his way to total control. It is this sheer greed and lack of moral obligation that leads him to where he finds himself.

His cry that it is the Yankees and their dollars that cheat him cannot exonerate him. It is a cry of the bitter grapes that he does not get. Had he succeeded, he would not be any better than the leaders he attempts to depose and now condemns. It is obvious that Wamala's coup plot is not in any way motivated by the moral obligation to rid his country of bad governance. All he wants is to get a feel of the presidency and control the country's resources. Having failed, he now turns round purporting to be a crusader of anti-imperialism or anti-neocolonialism. He is a bitter and frustrated man because he now lacks the power of control, not only in society but also at home. Tinka no longer respects nor takes him

seriously. Kanagonago, a semiliterate tycoon would not listen to him nor welcome him to his home because he has become a beggar and a commoner. Having lost his power and authority, Wamala has discovered how painful it is to live without authority. From his enactments of his past world he cannot be trusted to behave differently from the leaders and the bourgeois that he condemns.

It is instructive to note that he does not entertain small men during his heydays, though he places blame on his wife, who he says always chased them away. Wamala's awakening to the plight of the common people, therefore, comes as a form of baptism of fire. Unfortunately, it comes rather late in the day. As a result, he cannot be trusted to genuinely champion the rights of the down trodden. This is more true considering how he behaves when he wishes to sell his innovative ideas of double headed matches and election campaign slogans to Kanagonago. His main aspiration is to get money to buy for Tinka a big mansion and limousine. These are markers of opulence in society; they are yardsticks of success and acceptance in the world from which Wamala has fallen and wishes to go back. This puts him back in the same bourgeois class he has been part of and is now condemning. In this regard, granted an opportunity, Wamala would very much be willing to join ranks with his former ilk and enjoy life rather than crusade for fairness and equity.

He demonstrates this when he role-plays being minister, in which scene he clearly displays his lascivious instincts and hypocritical attitude towards the electorate, whom he pretends to care so much for, while in actual fact he holds in great contempt and condescension. He treats them condescendingly, only caring for their numbers when he needs their vote. Although this is merely role-play, it demonstrates how well Wamala understands the mannerisms of the men of power, proving how deeply he has imbibed the traits. Habits die hard, and this is why it will be naive to assume that Wamala would transform overnight into a pious moralist who can change the status quo.

Wamala envies and fears the bourgeois. When he role-plays a visit to Vincent Kanagonago, he portrays a sycophantic tendency toward this third rate tycoon whom he despises but fears may not grant him access. Kanagonago has the money, and by extension power and control. For as long as Wamala is penniless, he will remain subordinate to the authority of those who possess both economic and socio-political power, even if they are not half as educated as he is. He has lost his clout and his quest to regain it remains only a delusion. Those in the position of power have entrenched themselves and will go to any lengths to guard it jealously. The lack of power to call the shots is what underlies Wamala's frustration. This is the power that Wamala wields when he has authority. It is also the power he hungers for; he wishes he could go back to that world when he controlled people around him.

Tinka, on the other hand is too proud to bend low to the level of the people she looked down on during the prime of her life; leading to her state of loneliness and solitude in the slums. With the death of Wamala's dream, her aspiration to the world of high society also dies.

Although not an active player in contributing to the kitty of their largesse in their heydays, she is provided for by her father who is fairly well-off. Her father helps to "cheer" her on indirectly by providing bulls for Wamala to slaughter after his political rallies. Eventually, when she weds, she hopes that she will continue to enjoy the fruits of what comes with Wamala's tenure of office. Wamala's frustration, thus, becomes hers in the form of "Blows, battles, hunger, hatred, poverty and a cold bed", as he looks for illusive solace and sympathy from her (Ruganda, 1972, p, 35). This is not surprising since, in the first place, there really was no love in their relationship. Each has a hidden agenda to achieve through the other. Frustrated and starved of love, especially in the hour of need, Wamala resorts to use of brute force because he no longer stands for what Tinka aspired to; and she no longer sees any prospects in him.

Tinka's short taste of bourgeois life, like Wamala, is long enough to acquaint her with the mannerism of this world, which she still wants to cling to even after plunging into poverty. Her ego cannot let her allow her son to sell roast groundnuts to supplement the family finances. Tinka's metaphor of a maimed tigress (p. 8) is a direct link of her present circumstances to her glorious past. The pride of her heydays pits Tinka against a hostile world in her current circumstances of want. Her inability to bite humble pie in her current state makes her a recluse. Her sense of pride, based on her past life, makes her prisoner to herself. The only other person whom she can be close to is her husband, who unfortunately, is perpetually absent from home because of her caustic tongue. She is thus condemned to a state of self-inflicted solitude.

From the foregoing, it is clear that these two characters' world is controlled by their past experiences. And, instead of adjusting to their present reality, they keep brooding over how good their life was then and hope that someday things will change for them to go back to the glorious life. Hence, Wamala's long monologue (pp. 24–26) lamenting about the routine nature and squalor of his family – the poor diet and abject poverty that they are steeped in – betrays his lack of understanding of the cause of his tribulations. This lack of realization and understanding is what leads to estrangement both in their married life and from the community they now live in. There is, therefore, a situation of inversion – some form of poetic justice – that brings redress to Wamala and Tinka's past social crimes of selfishness and individualism that implode into the tragic end of their lives. The past thus catches up with the couple.

Berewa's Squandered Bounty in *Black Mamba*

*Black Mamba*is a weird story of a man, Berewa, blackmailing his wife, Namuddu, into sleeping with Professor Coarx, his boss, for monetary gain. Berewa claims to have been impoverished after what his father bequeaths him is squandered by his wife and her people. He is a disgruntled man seeking to regain what he has lost from his wife. He, therefore, seeks to recoup his bounty using what God has given him, a beautiful wife, to hook riches from his lascivious master. However, things do not work very well for him. A snake, a black

mamba, invades the professor's bedroom prompting Namuddu to burst into the living room in her night dress while Professor Coarx is entertaining a newly appointed colleague, Catherine, and one of his students, Odiambo. This exposes and embarrasses the professor as a pretentious amorous man and scuttles Berewa's ride to riches.

The drama opens with an argument between Berewa and Namuddu over how to spend the first one hundred shillings that she has earned from the adulterous enterprise. It is in the course of the altercation that Berewa reminds Namuddu of the loss she has occasioned on the family leading them to live in a state of deprivation and servitude. For Berewa, where his father left them is what has become Paradise lost in this current time where he has to scrounge to make ends meet.This argument parallels the Wamala-Tinka relationship in *The Burdens,* 'where each of the characters sees the other as the cause of their family's suffering'.However, in *Black Mamba,* Berewa lays blame squarely on his wife, Namuddu, and her close relatives on whom he claims to have spent part of his wealth**.**Berewa's action of forcing his wife into adultery is thus an attempt at reparation of the sins that Namuddu apparently commits. As for Namuddu, though it looks unnatural that she should accept her husband's indecent proposal, she is driven by a naive feeling of remorse for the loss she occasions, though inadvertently. In addition, once Namuddu joins her husband in the city, she develops a conscious desire for fine things – fine dresses, earrings and good shoes, which she sees other women possessing. It is Berewa's observation of his wife's fanciesthat makes her an easy prey and tool for his scheme.

Berewa's wily nature and unscrupulous hunt for wealth is sanctioned by his present urban world that is not only materialistic, but also decadent. The hunt for money and material items is the yardstick for success and distinction in this society. It does not matter how one gets wealth. What matters is that one is rich, and consequently respectable. Money and flashy clothes are the hallmarks of success.They make one to be called a "somebody." The end justifies the means in this hunt for material things. What underlies this cut-throat rat race for money and wealth is a silent societal approval that Berewa has come to understand very well. As he puts it, after Namuddu has done her assignment well, everybody will be pointing at them saying, "There goes Berewa and his sweet Namuddu. What a lot of money they have got! What a nice house they've built! And what expensive clothes they wear." (Ruganda, 1973,p. 14).

This is a new kind of world to which both Berewa and Namuddu have to adjust. Both have lived in the village where there is a sense of communality and humanity. These two aspects of African socialism are lacking in the urban world to which the couple has to adjust. Humanity, which is grounded in the African tradition of communality, has no room among city people. Berewa has long discarded this kind of village life, and is trying to wean his wife from it as well. The urban world is new and estranging to Namuddu; it is a world in which immorality is the norm, particularly if it justifies the end. Namuddu has to shed off her naivety and learn to be streetwise, even if it means losing her self-esteem to sleep with

her husband's boss. All Berewa wants from her is riches.With this kind of attitude towards life, it is not surprising that the rich prostitute, Namatta becomes the model of success not only for Berewa, but for Namuddu as well. While Berewa envies her husband for the money that "only the devil can count" (p. 12), Namuddu aspires to dress and look like her, "high-heeled shoes, a necklace, ear-rings and a handbag"(p.8).

It is this individualistic perception of life that makes Namuddu's brother to disregard all that Berewa has done for him and ignore him in his new impoverished state. Everybody thinks of themselves and there is no room for thinking about other people. The village world of being one's brother's keeper that Berewa is initially socialized in does not hold for people who live in town where decadence and immorality are pervasive. The generosity and sense of community on which village life is premised is the paradise lost for the city people. Berewa's father bequeathed him some wealth, to give him a head start in life. Berewa shares this bounty with his relations hoping that his gesture will be appreciated and reciprocated. He, however, gets a rude shock from his brother-in-law who does not regard him as somebody, after pursuing higher education. The lifestyle of compassion and minding the other that is part the village ethos has no room in the urban world. Thus, Berewa's aggressive and unscrupulous hunt for riches is undergirded by this realization and acceptance of lack of humanity.

In her naivety, Namuddu still believes that one can become rich without necessarily degenerating into prostitution. However, as she begins to sensitively adjust to her relationship with Professor Coarx, she becomes a changed woman. In the end, the fact that her effort fails, shows the author's condemnation of the new world of immorality. What Namuddu does not understand is that the man she is made to consort with and hold in high esteem and she takes to be kind, is also perverted. The only difference is that Professor Coarx's kind of perversion is Eurocentric. Being a married man, the professor has not enjoyed the bliss that is assumed to come with marriage. So having landed in an African city he expects to vent his frustration in the wild where every black girl wants to sleep with a Caucasian man. That is why he thinks Namuddu is one of those girls who patronize the Gardenia, a passion resort, to sell themselves cheaply to white men. He tells Namuddu, "It's amazing the passion all of you have for mean pretenses. One exactly like the other, tactful, probing, always pushing your case forward. I knowthat sort of stuff, my dear girl" (p. 27). This shows the professor has a misconceived picture of the African urban woman. Later on, he refers to women as play things that are tossed from one man to another. Besides this, Professor Coarx has created a world of deceit both around Namuddu and himself. He confesses that he has not enjoyed his married life and would like to stay with Namuddu as long as possible because he enjoys her company, but he does not want to show her to his visitors. It is this irony of character that leads Namuddu to believe that he loves her. This builds in Namuddu the dream of a blissful relationship. This dream bursts when the snake scares her and the professor has to protect his image. That is when she realizes the man's true colours. That he had only kept her as an object of sex.

As the play comes to a close, Namuddu displays some transformation. The initially innocent Namuddu can now confront both Professor Coarx and Berewa and tell them off when she feels her rights are trampled on. She has shed off her innocence and has started to assert herself. The new world, however, proves too dangerous and complex for her. When the police appear on the scene threatening to arrest her, she retracts to seek protection from Berewa, the man she has just been feeling equal to and independent of. This is an indicator that though she has become a little exposed, she is yet to develop the courage and wiliness that will enable her to survive in this challenging urban world of wolves.

What, therefore, underpins the action and events of *Black Mamba*is the understanding that the three protagonists, Berewa, Namuddu and Professor Coarx, have to fully adjust to the challenging and precarious urban world of the city as they try to regain their lost social and economic statuses as defined by the present parameters of the new society. The parameters are money and conspicuous material possessions for Berewa and Namuddu, and decorum for Professor Coarx. In this new world order, it is only the wiliest and fittest that will survive. In Berewa and Namuddu's relationship, the human elements of individualism, selfishness and pervasive materialism are satirized. In Professor Coarx, pretense to integrity and intellectualism are exposed.

Conclusion

Ruganda's drama is made of sagas whose action is predicated in anaphoric fashion to past events that have to be reflexively called upon for the understanding of the present circumstances. Indeed, the past experiences form the building blocks of conflicts that are carried forward to implode into the tragedy and embarrassment that resolve the tensions that characterize the two plays. The use of retrospective techniques accords the playwright elbowroom to tie the characters' past to the present and project to the future.

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