

## A Comparative Analysis of *The Trial of Declan Kimathi*, *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* and *My Children! My Africa!*: Implications for Postmodernist African Society

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### **Abstract**

Between modernism and postmodernism, critics have continued to appraise literary texts in the light of their contributions to and implications for the society. Opinions have continued to vary on the most suitable theory for coming to terms with prevalent conditions in contemporary society. Modernism precedes postmodernism and there is the rationalisation that it is thus more suitable for the contemporary African society. However, opposition to this view cannot be waved aside in view of evident effects of postmodernist ideal on the society. Hence, this paper attempts to further investigate the relevance of postmodernism to the African society in its struggle against socio-political aberrations. The three texts selected for this study have the potential of revealing a historical trend of struggle through early colonialism in West Africa to armed struggle in East Africa and late anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The study reveals that, historically, attempts by Africans to carry on spirited united struggle have usually been undermined by disunity and sabotage. This has again authenticated the skepticism about the tenets of postmodernism being able to effectively aid successful struggle against social-political aberrations on the African continent. Perhaps a blend of modernism and postmodernism would serve better.

### **Introduction**

What was modernism? What is postmodernism? How has postmodernism supplanted modernism and what is the implication of this for the African society? Critics have described them as two successive stages in the history of the arts of two opposed moods and attitudes. Postmodernism could be said to be a philosophical response to the fragmentation of modernism in the post-1945 period (Childs & Fowler, 2006). It was conceived as connoting the end of modernity and signaling the beginning of a new era. Modernism on the other hand was seen as the radical departure from traditional ideals as reflected in new ideas, change and dynamism. A new aesthetic movement was brought about as a result of new consciousness and change in

social conditions brought about in the age of industrialisation between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the arts, there was emphasis on subjectivity and impressionism as well as an intrinsic probing of self and existence. Literature was dedicated to experimentation and innovation as could be seen in the works of T.S. Eliot, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Wallace Stevens, among others.

Postmodernism proposes a departure from the basic tenets of modernism as a radical theoretical departure in mood and attitude. Among other things, it celebrates the disunity which modernism laments. Does it, in this way for instance, solve the societal problems which it proposes to address? This is one question which proponents of postmodernism like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault and Louis Althusser, among others have probably not stopped to ask. It is for this purpose that three historical plays are selected for this study with a view to revealing the historical trend of struggle against oppressive socio-political conditions on the African continent. A constant shift between liberalism and radicalism is evident and a fluid interface of ideals (modernist and postmodernist) cannot be ruled out.

### **African Plays and Postmodernist Undertones**

One thing that is evident from an appraisal of African plays is the emergence of traditions and perspectives in aesthetic, stylistic and thematic identity. For instance, the tradition of struggle as portrayed in the plays being analysed in this study, has betrayed not only a polarity between liberal and aggressive forms, but also a differing tendency towards communalism on the one hand, and individualism on the other hand. Biodun Jeyifo (1985:131) is of the view that the real nature of African writers' commitment is actually indicated by "what social class they predominantly or obsessively deal with, with what sympathy, antipathy or ambiguity, and with what distance or solidarity" they betray towards socio-ideological ideals. The obsession of African writers, perhaps unconsciously sometimes, as reflected in their works, has betrayed postmodernist tendencies and a reflection of its tenets.

Of unmistakable prominence is the value accorded individual determinism in the prosecution of the emergent state of struggle which is resultant from the oppressive conditions of colonialism and beyond. Education and 'enlightenment' have only helped to water the seed of misplaced idealism and sentiments in the mind of the African in the guise of individuality which the postmodernist celebrates. In Ahmed Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, the king is quick to notice the adverse effect which western education is to have on unsuspecting potential African elites, when he tells Obaseki "your whiteman's book and tongue kills the element of trust" (33). This is a reflection of the disillusioning effect of western education which was introduced to aid the subjugation of Africa and of the African mind. A better revelation of the rationale-killing effect of western education is made in Wa Thiong'o's and Mugo's *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*. Kimathi laments the adverse effects of western education of the colonialist on young Africans in: "their universities where they give our children an education to enfeeble minds, make them slaves, apes, parrots, shadows of the men and women they could have been" (69). The same situation is noticeable even in apartheid South Africa where education of the black was not a priority. The education which they were later allowed was to further disorientate

them and make them perpetual subjects who could not rebel against the inhumanity meted out to them. In Athol Fugard's *My Children! My Africa!*, Thami complains: "that classroom is a political reality in my life ... It's part of the whole political system we're up against" (120). He later rationalises better on the effect of the apartheid classrooms on the young black South Africans when he reflects; "we don't need the Zolile classroom any more. We know what they really are ... Traps which have been carefully set to catch our minds, our souls" (175). Thami has actually hit the bull's eye. The apartheid South African curriculum for the Black was intentionally designed to turn out docile, level-headed and perhaps foolish young men who would have been so disorientated that they would tolerate apartheid with philosophical equanimity.

The libertarian ideal which is becoming evident in African drama texts nurtures a far-pushed idealism which is fuelled by unbridled sentiment. There is, for instance, the usual attempt to talk 'sense' into young Africans, the sort of talk, according to Thami "that expects us to do nothing and wait quietly for white South Africa to wake up" (169). This tactic both fails and succeeds. Sometimes it succeeds in creating willing slaves to oppressive socio-political conditions. Sometimes, its failure is a remarkable success in producing dissatisfied Africans who have become so sentimental about their condition that they often act without the necessary caution or restraint. The youth in *My Children! My Africa!*, become so desperate after attempts by characters like Mr M. to dissuade them from violent protest. Thami tells Isabel that the Black no longer endure their condition. "They've no patience left, Isobel. They want change. They want it now." (169), he tells her. Struggle against oppression as portrayed in some African plays are thus carried out with the protesters failing to plan properly before embarking on the struggle. Rebellion against (communal) authority and anti-systemic mode of understanding and responding to their condition are postmodern ideals which one encounters in many African plays, especially colonial and post-colonial plays. In *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, Obaradesagbon states the chiefs' rationale for acting against the monarch's order thus: "if we go and carry out the wish of the Oba, at the next meeting of the chiefs, word will go out throughout Bini that we, all of us here, destroyed the agelong Ague tradition" (40). Ovonramwen himself is a victim of this anti-systemic 'infection'. He breaks Ague tradition because he finds himself in a dilemma. He reasons thus: as a man,

I too feel the difference. But as the Oba ... Ovonramwen n'Ogbaisi, the white man is like a pest. Often, he reminds me of the fly who comes to your feast and is determined to partake of it, even at the risk of his own life (46)

Situations such as this underscore in African plays the postmodern undertone which Afo Quayson (2007:650) describes as being "typified as a vigorously antisystemic mode of understanding with pluralism, borders and multiple perspectives, being highlighted as a means of disrupting the centralised impulse of any system." Centrality of struggle in this case becomes a difficulty.

The multiple perspectives which Quayson hints at is an emergent tradition in African writing which authenticates an opposition to over-emphasis on realism and favours fluid realism. In fact, a postmodern critic, Susan Sontag has perceived postmodernism as a refutation of the very

possibility of interpretation. What this means in simple terms is that, interpretation of condition and the best strategy to come to terms with it is not unifocal, or, if you like, 'communi-focal'. Rather, it is a fluid sentiment at the disposal of the individual or group. Even sub-groups and societies have continuously betrayed the tendency to deviate from established norms. This is the import of Nelson Fashina's (2008:310) assertion that, "every society in the world constantly undergoes changes in all facets of life." New realities continue to dawn on man every day, and with each, man finds the necessity to let go one ideal or the other which he has held to for a long time. "No matter how experienced the woman is at peeling onions, every new one brings her to tears" says Ovonramwen in *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*.

The postmodernist ideal as reflected in these African plays manifests in varying perspectives and approaches to protest against imperialism. Characters differ in their approaches. There are those who believe in dialogue and verbal protest and there are those who think that "fire puts out fire", to borrow Shakespeare's expression. The latter group is typified by the chiefs in *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, the guerrilla warriors in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, and the youth *My Children'. My Africa'*, believe in armed struggle, although they also recognise the power in words as weapons of protest and dissuasion. Kimathi, for instance, corrects Henderson's attempt at getting him disillusioned when the former tells him that he has come to him peacefully and unarmed. He retorts; "no, not with firearm Only with words" (32). Neither does he absolutely reject constructive dialogue. As Kimenia reveals about his character, "his motto has always been talk, talk till agreement is reached, but once rules have been set, once tasks have been assigned, they must be obeyed." For Kimathi, it is the situation that determines peoples approach to it. Hence, to the Judge's assertion that "truth is truth, just like  $2+2 = 4$ ", his response is, it depends on your base" (80). The same type of postmodern rationality is revealed in the character of Mr M. He realises that his pupils are not cautious enough in their proposed protest. So, he advises them: "if you want to do something revolutionary ... let us sit down and discuss it, because I have a few constructive alternatives" (167). His constructive alternative actually is that, "if the struggle needs weapon, give it words ... stones and petrol bombs can't get inside those armoured cars. Words can" (185).

The foregoing underscores the necessity of appraisal of the strategies of struggle or protest especially among those who are to carry it out. This is what can cushion the effect of pluralism and multiple perspectives – and this is necessary. At the least, what the individual has learnt through experience or education must also be tempered with rationalisation. Experience must also be brought to bear on spontaneous thought. This is the view expressed by Mr M when he quotes Confucius as saying that "learning undigested by thought is labour lost, thought unassisted by learning is perilous" (155). What one encounters in some African plays, however is either thought or 'unquestioned' learning or leaning.

One noticeable trend in these African plays is the playwrights' identification and tolerance for difference. One essential postmodern ideal which is manifest in these plays is that, rather than force one's ideals or truth on someone, it has become imperative for one to accept that they have their own ideals of truth, their own stories to tell. Kimathi agrees that it is a correct observation that with the British, the African has usually been the loser, but he maintains that a

new era has come and their uprising is “a new war” (34). Time is changing and Africans are learning to change with it. Within the ranks of protesters themselves, there are marked psychic and behavioural differences and these are enhanced by changing situations. One of Kimathi’s greatest trials is his dilemma in pronouncing judgement on his younger brother, Wambararia, the betrayer. He however, finally pronounces the judgement of “shoot them on sight” (79) on him and his fellow betrayers when he realises that they are unrepentant.

In all these, the enthronement of individualism receives prominence of attention in these African plays. The individual is imbued with the liberty to act in accordance to his own will and perception. There is the tilting towards dissensus as against consensus and communality in the responses of individuals to emergent conditions. Ovonramwen, the Benin monarch who is supposed to be the most patriotic custodian of the people’s tradition, to the amazement of his chiefs and subjects, decides to break the sacred Ague tradition. One of his chiefs, Ologbose cannot hide his astonishment and apprehension as he says, “I even fear more for the Oba who, at the period of Ague, when he should be with his forebears, is ready to meet the white man” (39). But Ovonramwen later proves that his decision is not borne out of cowardice as he refuses to flee from the onslaught of the white invaders. Even when he is eventually arrested, he refuses to acknowledge the authority of the British queen. “Ovonramwen pays obeisance only to the gods of the Bini people. Ovonramwen has no regard for any woman queen” (68), he maintains. Individuality is also portrayed in the characters of Kimathi who, in the face of several trials, remains “a hero to the people” (13) till the end, and Woman whose character is described as that of “fearless determination and a spirit of daring” (8). There are other characters like Wambararia, Kimathi’s brother, Gatotia and other saboteurs whose individuality mark them out as contrasts to Kimathi and other African patriots.

The spirit of consensus is one major victim of the reign of individualism. Ovonramwen’s real trial is not the invasion of the white man, but the loss of authority which he has wielded over his chiefs from the primal existence of the kingdom. The dissensus and fragmentation of opinion which the advent of the colonisers brought with it was hitherto unknown in Benin kingdom. One can guess at the shock which the monarch feels when, contrary to his command, Ologbose comes to report to him; “we killed the whitemen” (47). The African warriors in *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi* are faced with a traumatic reality when their own kinsmen continue to join the whitemen against them. This situation is properly described by Second Soldier thus:

... as we are talking now, Gatotia, Gaceru, Gati, Mwendenda and Wambararia, Kimathi’s own brother are wearing hoods, pointing out the terrorists and their supporters one by one (13)

This is the level of postmodern fragmentation in the African society which these plays reflect. The question however remains whether this individuality and fragmentation is a blessing to the African continent or not.

### Implications of Postmodernism for the African Society

Every theory or ideal has been admired, adopted or eulogised, not because of its name but because of what is perceived as its qualities or potentials for positive contributions to the society. But this notwithstanding, no ideal has been known to survive forever without its share of setbacks and criticism against it. On the one hand, there are those who would remain almost permanently fascinated by the glory of such ideals which they never see fading away. On the other hand, there are those who would get disillusioned because, apart from the fact that they are of the view that no system is all-inclusive, they probably have noticed one shortcoming or the other in a prevalent ideal. Enforcing universality and timelessness of truth and reality becomes a problem in such a case.

Determination and self-determination are noticeable twin offsprings of postmodernist ideals on the African continent. As reflected in these plays, there are individuals, and in some cases groups, who betray determination and commitment to the cause of their struggle against colonial oppression. This of course begins with their individual conviction and resolve, and translates to group affinity and unity for a necessary striving for emancipation as is portrayed in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *My Children'. My Africa'*. Woman, in the first play, reveals the mood of the guerrillas when she describes their task as “the trial of our strength, our faith, our resolve, the trial of our loyalty. Our cause” (14). Kimathi further states their mind-set and preoccupation thus: “we demand our freedom. That’s the eternal law of the oppressed, of the humiliated, of the injured, the insulted! Fight, struggle, change” (27). Even when he sits “on hot coals of trials and temptations” (44), Kimathi remains undaunted in his resolve. In *The Trial Dedan Kimathi*, “the playwright’s attitude is informed by revolutionary combativeness” (Jeyifo 1985:48). In spite of his difference of opinion with regards to strategy for the protest, in the latter play, Mr M is of the same mind with the protesters in their clamour for freedom. “I want our freedom as much as any of you” (166), he affirms.

Rationality and fluid realism are essential qualities which postmodernism has endowed the African society with, in its response to emerging problems. Situations are analysed by individuals with postmodern leanings and the result of this is rational responses which may be at variance with established conventions as is evident from the actions of Ovonramwen and Eyebokan. Realising that the Bini kingdom is at a precarious crossroad, Eyebokan advises the king to accept the inevitable. “The river cannot refuse to receive the rain” (35), he reasons with the monarch. The king himself is rational enough to understand his dilemma. He decides, against Ague tradition, to see the whiteman whom he sees as a piece of meat sticking between his teeth while eating which he has to remove before continuing (36). He realises that he needs caution in handling the matter. “The whiteman insists on collision ... My chiefs, determined to shield my shame demand that I confront the whiteman, blood for blood. But will that provide the answer?” he observes. Faced with this dilemma, he takes a decision that astonishes his chiefs and subjects as he declares “the ceremony must wait ... we shall stop for a while” (37). It has never happened before. Hence, by African traditional standard, it is an abomination. But this is happening at a time when the imperialists have arrived with contrary ideology aided by superior firepower. So, Ovonramwen is allowing himself to be guided by a postmodern rationale. And he is right, as

events later reveal. Uzazakpo is another character in the play whose postmodern rationale is not in doubt. The reader would perhaps be shocked to hear an African telling his monarch, "never trust the gods all the time, for they poke at man for their fun" but we would probably agree that he has spoken the truth when, in the same breath, he states, "never trust human beings either, for they blow their motives easily"\* (54). In *My Children! My Africa!*, Thami makes Isabel to understand that the Black are not irrational savages, but that it is the obnoxious apartheid laws "that have made simple, decent black people so desperate that they turn into mad mobs" (196); what Biodun Jeyifo (1985:101) refers to as "a confined victimhood." To be rational in the postmodern sense is to take stock of one's condition under the prevalent situation and come to terms with inescapable reality.

Humanity and existentialism are often at divergent play in the lives of individuals and postmodernism tends to identify gross inadequacy in the humanity of people. Is one's character determined by one's nature, or is one's nature determined by one's character? This is the basic philosophical problem which existential critics like Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir and others try to find answers to. The characters in these African plays are often torn between the ideals of societal expectations and their existential individuality. Whereas, his chiefs choose to act in accordance to communal expectations, Ovonramwen prefers to act as a postmodern character whose roles are not determined by his status as a king but by his perception as an individual. Ologbose reveals the problem of existential disparity when he expresses the difference of the chiefs to the king's decision. Says he:

... the Oba's reason for wanting to break tradition to see the strangers may appear acceptable to the simple ordinary citizens. But we are not simple people. We are the chiefs of the Benin empire. We hold the customs and traditions of the Benin people together (39).

The individual-society dialectic is an emergent tradition in African writing (Jeyifo 1985). Jeyifo goes further to explain that, "group, class or corporate identity informs personal action and behaviour and this in turn acts back on the group or the class" (48). Existential ideals are thus determinants of perspectives of confrontation and struggle.

Where individual perceptions and ideals are the essential criteria for carrying out tasks which are communal or group concerns, there is a tendency for not only disparity in opinion but also conflict of ideologies. The incidence of disillusion cannot be ruled out, and the situation becomes worse when this leads to confusion, which is the result in many such cases. A good example is Mr M, in *My Children! My Africa!* Thami describes his mentor, Mr M as a disillusioned ideologist in his old-fashioned reaction to apartheid. Thami says of him:

... he is out of touch with what is happening to us blacks and the way we feel about things. He thinks the world is still the way it was when he was young. It's not. It's different now, but he's too blind to see it (169).

This is perhaps one of the shortcomings of postmodernism which African playwrights have not thought it necessary to guard against.

If tolerance for individualistic difference is a plausible ideal for which postmodernism must be desired, would one also find it interesting to eulogise the opportunism which such individualistic liberty sometimes encourages? Every ideology meets some psychic roots in every mind and it acts as catalyst to aid the growth of such plants whether they are weed or wheat. Having realised the individualistic liberty which postmodernism encourages, many Africans have seized it as advantage to advance their opportunistic tendencies. In the plays considered for this study, especially *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, there are notable examples of opportunistic characters that bank on their individual liberty and tolerance for difference to exploit the situation of the struggle to their selfish advantage. Opportunism is, in fact, a euphemism for selfishness as it is revealed in the activities of Obaseki in the first play and Wambararia and the other saboteurs in the latter.

Obaseki is a perfect example of an opportunist. He turns every opportunity to his own advantage. Like Philip who desires to take Benin for the glory of Britain and his, Obaseki the Benin chief in charge of commerce pays so much attention to his personal gains that the monarch, Ovonramwen accuses him of devoting “more time to trade than the affairs of the state” (33). He is so greedy that both the king and the white strangers notice that he can do anything for monetary gains. “You will sell anything” (34), Ovonramwen tells him, and Carter says of him, “he will sell anything, once the price is right” (62). Obaseki himself does not hide his love for money and material things. He is of the views that if the white man is not liked for anything, at least, his money is good (34). Obaseki, as an opportunist is also a lover of status position and power. The white colonialists are quick to notice this weakness in him and exploit it to their advantage. With regards to Obaseki’s power mongering predilection, Carter says: “his ambition whets his appetite for preferment. A little pressure here and a carrot there ...” (58), is all that is needed to get his support for the white colonisers. Neither are the colonisers mistaken in their assessment of him, as he soon comes to them seeking power and privileges. “Some authority, I need something new. Some powers. I want to be your eye and tongue ...” (60), he tells them. He eventually becomes the Permanent Vice-President of the Native Council, a position for which he betrays his monarch, Ovonramwen. The arrest and deportation of the king does not bother him. He is only too glad to serve the whiteman. “It is my honour to be of service to you, Your Excellency. May your ... er ... our reign be full of interesting times” (61), he gleefully intones.

Wambararia is no better than Obaseki. “He sold out for his stomach” (33) says Kimathi. Many characters in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* including the collaborators, the African colonial soldiers, the bankers, politicians, businessmen and even the clergy are opportunists. In their different ways, they betray the cause of the Mau Mau insurgents because of their own gains. So entrenched in the colonial Kenyan society is the issue of opportunism that, the colonisers attempt to bribe Kimathi himself and make him betray the cause of the protesters. Kimathi however rejects their offer. “Money ... for sell out of our people ... NEVER” (40), he retorts.

Faced with the menace of opportunists, the struggle efforts against oppressive conditions in Africa have, in many cases, been greatly undermined. Sabotage is so common in the African society that it has come to be tolerated in many instances as one of ‘those things.’ Kimathi



realises that, in his effort to advance the Mau Mau cause, he needs to contend with and “protect the struggle from betrayal, opportunism and regional chauvinism” (33). Ovonramwen is helpless in the face of sabotage which eventually destroys his rulership. Perhaps Mr M has his reasons for not supporting the armed protest of the South African youth, but reporting their activities to the police is an act of sabotage.

That postmodernism discourages literature of melancholy, especially one that laments the loss of communal unity and sees such lamentation as misplaced idealism and sentiment may not be a wrong ideal. That the loss of unity is not something to be mourned, but something to be celebrated, according to postmodernists, may be tolerated. But if disunity is the result of this spirited attempt to escape from the one-and-all ideology, ‘appropriate’, may not be the appropriate tag for such postmodern ideology. Rather, it begs another epithet. As we encounter in these plays, disunity has continued to undermine the efforts that have gone into struggles against oppressive conditions right from colonial time.

Earlier in the play, *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, the monarch has been aware of the threat of disunity to the corporate existence of his kingdom. He has ever been apprehensive of opportunists and saboteurs in his domain. “The foxes murmur. And in their eyes, I see ambition ... cunning and calculated moves, and most of all, their hearts sway easily” ((25). It is too late for the monarch when he finally realises that he has been contending with “enemies within, enemies without” (73). The same problem of disunity also undermines the concerted efforts of the Mau Mau warriors and peasants in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Boy reveals that his “father was driven away from Mbari land in Nyeri by one of his relatives who worked as a court interpreter” (18). There is much disunity among the peasants and the guerrilla soldiers that they have to contend with both external and internal threats. Kimathi realises the inhibiting effect of this situation for the struggle. Hence he affirms that “internal and external foes will be demolished” (83), for Kenya to be free. The young freedom fighters in *My Children: My Africa*, are more aggressive in their reaction to disunity and sabotage. Their protest claims the lives not only of some of the protesters but also that of Mr M, Thami’s mentor who is later identified as a saboteur. Isabel is so shocked at such vicious reprisal. “What madness drove those people to kill a man who had devoted his whole life to helping them?” she wonders. But Thami makes her to understand that their seemingly insane action is borne out of desperation and the realisation that Mr M has actually sabotaged their efforts by telling the police about their planned protest.

In one word, the postmodernist ideals of individuality and tolerance for difference, if not tempered with rationality and caution, will continue to undermine efforts at attacking oppressive conditions and thereby achieving emancipation on the African continent. Hence, disunity is what leaders of struggles or protests must first strive to guard against. An essential preoccupation of Wa Thiong’o and Mugo in this play is to teach Africans unity in their struggles against oppression. In the play, Woman makes a good attempt to conscientise protesters to be united so that they would be focussed for their struggle, rather than fighting among themselves. She says:

... that is the way it should always be. Instead of fighting against one another, we who struggle against exploitation and oppression, should give one another strength

and faith till victory is ours ... United, our strength becomes the faith that moves mountains (60)

She has actually made the right observation about struggles in Africa and one of the internal factors that have continued to inhibit them. Kimathi re-echoes the opinion of Woman by emphasising the importance of unity in his address to his fellow warriors. He has this to say:

... stronger than any machine gun fire, stronger than the Lincoln and Harvard bombers, mightier than their best generals is our unity and discipline along correct lines, people's line. With unity and discipline in our total commitment to the liberation of us who sweat and labour, we can move mountains(69)

Unity, discipline and commitment are essential qualities which the playwrights advocate through the characters of Kimathi, Woman and other patriotic characters in the play. The ultimate preoccupation of the playwrights, as expressed in the words of Kimathi is to "teach solidarity to a divided world" (44), the African society and those who attempt to carry on struggles against oppression in the face of postmodernist ideals which erroneously conceived to license disunity.

### **African Society after Postmodernism**

The ideological monologues which have come to torment African academic and literary scholarship have ironically led to so much discursive noise. To shape this noise, to come to terms with constant changes in human behaviour and modes of expression, to locate the appropriate state or trend of reactions to emergent situations has come to be the real hurdle which African critics strive to surmount. Where are we now? Are we now properly at a postmodern age or something beyond it? How are African writers portraying their characters in the light of ideological conditioning? What has started to dawn on critics of African literature is that there is this tendency of departure or deviation from what could strictly be regarded as postmodern ideals. It is therefore not uncommon to hear critics coining terms to reflect something that is either beyond postmodernism or conjures up an idea of recency. Such terms as 'ultra-modernism' and 'Tate modernism' have been suggested. But have these received the acceptance of African scholars and writers in their portrayal of African characters in their response to their conditions? The search for a proper caption or hypothesis for describing the contemporary condition of the African man is ongoing.

Toyin Falola (2013:40), in his keynote address at the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) convention, while analysing the trend of the portrayal of the Nigerian society and characters in literary texts observes that, what is being experienced in Africa is "the inauguration of a future that is very modern." Either in Falola's postulation or earlier suggestions, there is an evident to re-introduce modernism into the ideological picture of the society. This may not be wrong since post-modernism itself is a suggestion of a stage beyond or after modernism. In human, there has always been something after the 'after'. If modernism entails change and innovation, then new changes would rationally be conceived to lend themselves to new perspectives. But if fragmentation and loss of unity is what postmodernism celebrates, and the African society has

seen the need to have a second thought about eulogising these, then we must face the reality of a more-than-postmodern age. Let us return to Falola again. Falola has, in his analysis decried what he terms “the moments that mark the apogee of failure.” We cannot afford to run away from the fact that the postmodern ideal of individuality and celebration of the loss of unity has continued to bring about socio-administrative failure on the African continent.

In view of the foregoing, it has become imperative to rethink our ideological position with regards to the reaction of Africans to emergent conditions. One reality that stares us in the face is the fact that we cannot run away from modernist ideals while attempting to come to terms with postmodernism. Perhaps a blend of the two theories is necessary to define the contemporary state of the African society. For one thing, it has become clear that we can never escape from the past, because, according to Zakes Mda, in his preface to John Kani’s *Nothing but the Truth*, “the past is a powerful presence in the present.” It is also not possible to live in the past even when the present is not ‘friendly’. Perhaps it is better to pitch our tent with 4th Guerrilla Fighter in, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, who posits that “we should learn from our past. But it would be a great mistake to become its slave” (72). It would equally be a great error to become a slave to the present.

What has been established from the analysis of these plays is that there is an emergent tradition in African writing which questions both the ideals of communality and individuality, in one breath. There is evidence of a ‘neo-modern’ quest into the relationship between the African man and his society in the face of emergent situations on the continent. Jeyifo (1985:48) is of the view that contemporary African drama has continued to give expression to “an indissoluble, dialectical link between the individual and the society, between freewill and determinism, between the kingdom of freedom and necessity.” Ovonramwen’s individuality is juxtaposed against communal ideals in an age when the African society is just emerging from her age long reliance on tradition to be confronted with imperialist reality. His rationality is however, undermined by the individuality of the opportunists and traditional rebels against a new socio-political order. The result is disastrous. In Fugard’s South Africa, the young freedom fighters become slaves to their new-found ideal of radical armed protest and shun the necessary dialogue, proper planning and stock-taking. The result is equally catastrophic. It is only in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, where, in spite of sabotage and betrayal, there is a commendable measure of unity among the insurgents that triumph is achieved. This, in the view of Jeyifo (1985:49), is possible because, “culture is created or forged anew in the struggle; the old songs and myths, the erstwhile values, customs, relationships and identities are reshaped and given a new meaning.” Postmodernism has thus been reappraised in the pursuit of a reliable response to emergent socio-political issues.

Commitment has to be redefined in the portrayal of situations and characters in contemporary African drama. The issues of commitment and resolve in addressing emergent issues in Africa, as revealed through the analysis of these plays must take a decisive turn. This is necessary because, according to Jeyifo (1985:54) “the main subject is revolution; its necessity or impossibility, its heterogeneous socio-historical contexts, its prospects and possible directions”. As historical plays, these plays have the potential of giving the reader access to the past, the present and a

prognosis of the future. They have thus revealed the trend of events and opinions in Africa in terms of responses to emergent issues.

### Conclusion

An analysis of the three plays used for this study reveals that the approach to an emerging situation is largely dependent on the nature of the arising problem. Failure to conform to this imperative often leads to disasters. The chiefs in *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* as well as the protesters in *My Children! My Africa!*, including Mr M, fail to come to terms with the peculiarity of their colonial experiences and the necessity of more-than-postmodernist strategies in confronting them. The disunity which results from such lack of proper appraisal costs them the success of their struggle against oppression.

Everyone who advances an argument has a rationale. No ideology is absolutely right and none is absolutely wrong. This is certainly true of modernism and postmodernism, especially as they apply to African socio-political situation. This much is evident from the analysis of the three plays we engaged in this study. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* in which unity in the face of disunity is sustained provides the greatest measure of success. This should be a lesson for the consideration of neo-modernism as an ideological lens for appraising the contemporary African situation. Certainly, we cannot afford to remain tied to the apron of communal ideals. But we cannot also afford to wilfully submit to disunity in the name of postmodernism.

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