CULTURAL ALIENATION AND THE CONCEPT OF EXILE IN
Covenant with Death.

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Abstract

The Eastern and the Horn of Africa are both the source and home of the world's biggest chunk of refugees and internally displaced people. The world's biggest refugee camp, Daadab, is in the North-Eastern Kenya. The refugee scenario is evidence that the East African region has been severely scarred by upheavals of various kinds, which range from hostile physical environments wrought by nature, such as floods, pestilence or drought. Physical conflicts in Africa have often involved ethnic groups, individuals and political systems, but there have also been conflicts between individuals and cultures that lead in alienation or physical expulsion from one's community. The later causatives are the concern of this paper. The paper critically examines John Ruganda's perspective of cultural exile in his play, *Covenant with Death* (1973). The period when this play was written is significant in the history of his native country, Uganda. The country had attained political independence in 1962, a year before the publication of the play. The ancient kingdoms had not broken off from traditional cultures. In fact the text addresses the problems brought by colonization on the cultural fabric on the Baganda people. The paper adopts a structural approach to the analysis of exile proposed by Anne Gagiano. This approach is complemented by the linear model of Isaac Yetiv.

Introduction

The East African region has historically been scarred by various forms of conflict that result in exile. Themes of socio-political dislocation have served to underscore the fragility of African civilization, especially when subjected to the kind of irreversible devastation wrought by both cultural and political brutality. The concept of exile involves an examination of that process of destructive forces of an individual's world that range from forced expulsion from one's home due to 'uprootedness' from one's society or separation of man from nature and the rest of his community. This state of affairs may result from a devastating upheaval of one destructive weight or another, which puts the individual in a tragic situation which he neither understands nor controls. This leads to a depersonalization that shatters his emotional harmony with himself, his experience and his society.

In dislocation the people are either pummeled into oblivion by forces too powerful to withstand, or else try heroically to resist the cataclysmic dehumanization resulting from the cruelty of man

against men. In resisting, a struggle ensues, a struggle that has nothing to do with man against man, but rather a war between moral and taboo.

In analyzing exile, various approaches may be adapted. The texts may be examined in relation to other texts, or they may be studied against the backdrop of the times, traditions and circumstances. Bearing in mind the rapid dynamism of society especially after the colonial invasion, the latter approach is preferred in this article. This is because it demands recalling the sub-text which, as we have said, influences creative material. The sub-text alludes to the socio-political background that facilitates understanding of the texts.

Born in the British colony of Uganda in 1941, Ruganda came to distinguish himself as East Africa's foremost playwright. He grew up when the nation was struggling for political liberties, maturing at a time when the post-colonial middleclass was entrenched in mimicry of European lifestyles. *Covenant with Death* could thus be described as a 'culturally restive' play as was the playwright's epoch.

In their introduction to *Exile and African Literature,* Jones D. and Jones M. observe that "the mass displacement of peoples resulting from *internal feuds*[1] which have plagued the African continent in the last twenty five years or so have yet to produce a significant body of literature" (i). They further recognize that an ephemeral refugee culture that has often emerged from exiled communities has only produced patriotic songs, skits and reflections which might lead to a more abiding culture, but such material is yet to be subjected to systematic literary analysis. I concur with the Jones' that Ruganda's drama has received similar treatment, which is rather unfortunate in an environment where violence, alienation and exile are regular experiences.

Joe De Graft addresses the traditional African man's conception of drama in which he identifies the cultural practices of the African people as the foundation of traditional theatre. The scholar links the origins of African drama to rituals performed by ancient people in apprehension, propiation and purification against threats to humanity such as floods, lightening and acts of evil men. This represents the pre-colonial conception of African drama. During and after colonization, drama continued to address threats of de-culturization with a call for cultural emancipation, and preservation of the African heritage .A substantial section of post-independence literature focused on related themes. One of the most notable productions of the English expression was Okot P'Bitek's satirical piece, *Song of Lawino.* The song is a hilarious critique of African 'apemanship', or what post colonial critics call 'double consciousness'.

Analytical approach

The analysis of *Covenant with Death* has been guided by Anne Gagiano's structural approach to the study of exile experiences, as well as Isaac Yetiv's linear model. Gagiano provides a framework for analyzing exile experiences which she categorizes as either autobiographical (narrator's own) or

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[1] Although the Jones refer to physical conflict arising from among other things armed wars and ethnic cleansing, the

phrase is used here to refer to both the physical conflicts, as well as the psycho-social conflicts within an individual.

anecdotal (those of his acquaintances). She isolates 'dimensions' through which exile may be analysed. She refers to her model as them 'dimensions of exile'.

In the first dimension which she calls *ontological,* escape from one's home is attributable to man's curiosity which compels him to explore the universe in search of the meaning of existence. Man is thus presented as inquisitive in nature, an attribute that contributes to his restlessness. Critically examined, the individual is actually pushed out of his habitual environment by a dream of a better life which he finds lacking at home. He imagines that the satisfaction he would find in the new world would gratify him and shock his compatriots when they listen to the story of his exploits.

In the second dimension which she calls *colonial/political* exile has a dual face. First, it is the de-culturization originating from the colonial experience which left the African man psychically and socially disemboweled after his language and cultural practices that sustained him for centuries were taken away, leaving him with a strong negative image of his way of doing and imagining.

In the third dimension, *the social*, aspects of exile are attributable to societal rejection and disapproval. This too has two faces as well; the individual either finds fault with the society, or society finds fault with the individual. The individual may find the confines of his society limiting his growth, or develops a strong feeling that it needs to change for him to belong to it. This is the dimension exemplified in Henrik Ibsen in his play *An Enemy of the People.* The protagonist, Dr.Thomas Stockmann makes up his mind to escape into what he calls 'New World' where the "foolish majority" who make up his society will not manage to set foot. It is here he hopes to bring up a new generation of young people unpolluted by the mediocrity and hypocrisy he finds in his Norwegian motherland. On the other hand, the society may reject the individual for non-conformity to social norms, especially those who commit rape, murder or incest.

In the fourth dimension which she refers to as t*he mythical* Gagiano delves into the philosophy of textual content. The message of the text is seen as a collective expression of people's values and intuitions; the writer merely taking his role as a messenger. Dathorne (53) refers to this aspect as the 'group concept' of the African man's way of existence in which the African people are seen to share, in a basic way, a collective attitude to life and consequently to literature.

In the last dimension, - *The psychological-* dislocation refers to those anxieties and mental upheavals occurring from physical dislocation. Gagiano observes that abrupt, indefinite introduction of an individual into a new environment 'others' the individual from himself, causing trauma. This state of affairs, she notes, is 'a spiritual journey equivalent to thousands of physical miles' (2).

Yetiv's perspective

Yetiv sees dislocation as a process with a beginning and end. The first stage in this process is what he calls *discovery*. An individual destined for dislocation enthusiastically 'discovers' a new world which he esteems for its glamour. The next thing he does is to seek identification. This is characterized by an urge to identify with the discovery, integrate and assimilate its values. Here the individual selects those aspects of the new culture that are deemed superior to his own, and consciously or unconsciously ignores the destructive ones.

In the third stage, which he calls *rejection*, the individual develops a negative image of his own culture and everything it purports. He feels that it must change to resemble the new if he is to

continue belonging to it. He is further fascinated by the warmth and understanding of the 'other' which receives him with open arms.

In the next stage called *rediscovery,* one begins to discover the weaknesses of the new. He is elevated to a tower of enlightenment from which he can look back and see the beauty of his own culture. Nostalgia and disillusionment set in, invoking a desire to return home. Finally, the individual embarks on a journey home in what Yetiv calls *return.* The individual vows to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of his people, and learn to live with them. He also hopes to 'locate' his lost steps and carry on with life as before. However, it occurs to him that not only has the wheel of life turned, but also that society has formed an attitude against him. Re-integration becomes a nightmare, leaving him physically in society but psychologically and emotionally alone. These two approaches provide a more comprehensive framework upon which we can effectively attempt to establish how Ruganda imagines exile in *Covenant with Death.*

Exile as Cultural Alienation

In this play, Matama, a twenty three year old girl is the subject. The play begins with her being escorted to her rural home by Motomoto, also a young man, after a five year stint in the city. She is terminally ill. Her destiny is allegorized by an owl-cry at curtain rise. In the culture of the playwright, an owl is a bird of bad omen. It is the devil's messenger to bring news of death in the homestead where it perches.

Some five years before, Matama allegedly leaves the village after it is established that she is barren. The community treats her with contempt before one Bwana Duncan, a visiting European tourist comes by and to her amazement, the white man does not find fault in her condition. Together they flee into the city. After the end of his African tour, Duncan leaves Matama infected by an incurable disease, and of course a few coins for the youthful Motomoto to escort her to the village where the white man originally fished her.

Matama's own birth has mythical foundations. Her parents, Bamya and Kabooga, were barren and desperate for a child. They are re-enacted contracting a bond with Kaikara, the goddess of fruition, to give them heir they had sought in vain for over thirty years. In the bond, the goddess promises them a child on condition that they would enchant her with roles as the priestess of the goddess' shrine. They are to make sure that she knows no man all her life.

 At sixteen, Matama breaks the code by she engaging in illicit sex. Kaikara the goddess strikes, leaving the belle barren. Ruganda constructs her protagonist in the scheme advocated by Yetiv. The contempt shown to her by the village men characterises her adversity, which in turn leads to 'discovery' of Bwana Duncan and the city, both of which represent destructive foreign forces. She says of the village men;

> …they believed it was useless to own a barren shamba. The shamba was there
> you see, ready for any farmer, young or old. People sowed and sowed. But there
> was no harvest. So they left the shamba fallow permanently (86).

The *shamba* motif allegorizes her womanhood, while the *farmer* represents the men who "dug" it. The absence of *harvest* refers to lack of a child despite the willingness she expresses to see some

fertile seed planted in her. In addition, she reveals that the society treated her to epithets after the famed African herbs failed to cure her. The men would say that "a barren shamba is best left to children to turn into a playground" (86), or tell her on the face that she was "worse than elephant dung" (86). Duncan's arrival thus provides her with a new lease of life, distant from the village incivility. She explains;

> My renewal came when Bwana Duncan called at my father's house…I felt life crawling back into my veins. I felt victorious over petty village ideas. I flew away like an eagle determined never to cast my eyes homewards again, and never to wallow in the mud (93).

Her integration into the new culture is seen in her way of speech, dress and make up, all pointers to alienation. The Traveller, also a seer, describes her in language reminiscent of Lawino's in Okot's *Song of Lawino.* He refers to her as a "Mimisabu[2]…with red lips and trousers and glasses" (78).
Disillusionment sets in when Matama learns that Duncan was merely having a nice time with her on his holiday. She regrets;

> But as Bwana approached his time of departure, somehow or other I learnt that I had served his purpose very well; and that's why he had liked me so much. I was the kind of woman he needed in a foreign land…I wonder whether he will remember the few years, the few good years, we spent together (93-94).

Ruganda insinuates that the new culture provides temporary happiness, and leaves behind it great destruction. He also presents this kind of escape as an arena for enlightenment, the reason Matama develops a spontaneous desire to return home. She says, "I have learnt to live with reality, with my past" (95).

Ruganda reinforces Matama's alienation through juxtaposing her with Banura, a village girl of her age, less exposed and far less beautiful, yet highly regarded by society for her ability to give birth. On seeing her, Motomoto observes that "she is not as beautiful as you are, my lady, despite your ill-health. She looks *monstrously* ugly"(88) (Italics mine for emphasis). Society would rather have her ugliness that a 'barren shamba'.

Mindblasts of Cultural Exile
Other than physical dislocation, there are instances of psychological festering arising from physical removal, which I refer here as 'mindblasts'. Matama personally compares her barren nature to "a full-grown calabash, shimmering on the outside and rotting on the inside" (96).

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[2] This word was used by servants of a colonial master to refer to female members of the master's family. Here it may be used to insinuate Matama's attempt at mimicking the white man's culture.

The calabash image reinforces the density of trauma from the social discord society accords her.

Secondly, the psychic unequilibrium she suffers manifests in nostalgia and daydreaming. Often Matama recalls her mother's love and nurture, compares herself to the Biblical prodigal and hopes for motherly treatment upon arriving home. She recalls her mother having to do all household chores in love, and making her a meal of white ants. She encourages Motomoto to cover the remaining hills with her saying;

> We should be feeling triumphant, because we've got only seven hills to cover, just seven hills, before I arrive home. Moments from now mother will be grinding millet for her prodigal daughter. 'Matama, my hands may be frail, my back tired, but they know what to do when my daughter has returned. No, no, no, child, you are not going to fetch water, I'll do it'. (72).

Daydreaming is revealed by Motomoto in his threat to abandon the sick girl on the roadside and run back for fear that her clan might blame him for her illness. He says, "…with this speed of ours, this snailing over inches, and your ill-health, and your daydreaming" (73). This enhances the melancholic mood set off at the beginning of the play by the owl-cry.

The social force of disapproval and rejection is revealed by Motomoto himself in revealing his own condition. At frst he appears an innocent guide until the moment when Matama's condition gets into his nerves. He reveals that he too, had once contemplated suicide. He's also sterile. Death becomes man's choice in the face of the cultural threats. He explains; "I resorted to the knife. And you can see the indelible mark on my neck up to this time. But some man intervened before I did myself in" (88).

In this play, dislocation is not merely a physical removal from home. It involves conflict within an individual that somehow overwhelms them. It involves a search for identity, which, more often than not, overpowers and renders derelict.

The shock of locating home
Yetiv provides a model for analysis of 'return' from exile which fits in the exegesis of *Covenant with Death*. He has elaborated that return is informed by reflection, and serves an avenue for enlightenment and self discovery. For Matama, self discovery is a catharsis actualized in death for disobedience of Kaikara the goddess.

Conclusion

It is evident from this analyses that Ruganda has dedicated *Covenant with Death* to cultural alienation and exile. He intelligently interweaves the narrative of both Matama and Motomoto with the fabric of the specific cultures that produce and destroy them. The text is a narrative of the predicament of the African man in a hostile cultural milieu. The action he creates is closely bound with the East African man's social philosophy, practice and historical crises of his own era. The theme of cultural exile is undoubtedly multifaceted and sensitive, but his sensitivity in handling it is commendable.

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