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Reflections of Brecht's Political Theatre on African Drama: Imbuga's *Successor* and Rotimi's *If...* in Perspective

Wangari Mwai

*United States International University (USIU)
Nairobi, Kenya*

John Mugubi & Pomak Frank Tengya

*Film and Theatre Arts Department
Kenyatta University, Nairobi Kenya*

Abstract

This paper takes a critical look at the influences of Bertolt Brecht's dramaturgy on the works of African playwrights. It is evident that the theoretical approach and style of Bertolt Brecht has shaped the new narratives that has been unleashed on the modern stage. His devoted treatise on social theatre theory and the creation of storylines that are centred on around the emancipation of the people has served as a template for most playwrights in developing countries. This article looks at the deployment of the Brechtian Theatre model by two prolific African playwrights. Francis Imbuga's *Successor* and Ola Rotimi's *If...* from the popular nature of the storylines that captures the historicity that shapes the African political landscape, to the everyman characterization that the playwrights deploy; this nature of characterization easily speaks to the African because it propagates its historical and immediate challenges. All these attributes are firmly entrenched in Bertolt Brecht's Theatre. The article looks at the historical nature of the plays and their social relevance to the development of man in the modern society.

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Introduction

Biodun Jayifo in *The Truthful Lie: Sociology of African Drama* (1985) concretizes the notion that drama most at times get its raw materials from the immediate social events that occur within the society that the playwright resides within. Alluding from the point of view above, it is critical for us to note that most literary dramatists use the surrounding events in their society as raw materials when they are writing. To be able to write vividly about the society, the artist must be able to mediate between social norms, and the true position of things within that society. Bertolt Brecht adds to the responsibilities of the artist within the society when he posits in his *Writing the truth: Five Difficulties that it takes courage because;*

...times of extreme oppression are usually times when there is much talk about high and lofty matters. At such times it takes courage to write of low and ignoble matters such as food and shelter for workers;...when all the talk is of perfect and imperfect races, it takes courage to ask whether it is not hunger and ignorance and war that produce deformities...(p:125)

Brecht is of the opinion, that the writer is a social commentator; by that status therefore he must continually write the truth about his society. Creating a clear and crisp imagery that the people would easily understand, this means the deployment of language in art is vital to the success of the work of art. This is because in using art as a means of communication; the exchange could be either verbal or non-verbal. The basic aim of all art is to communicate explicitly to the audience. This is because the message therein, is for the audience; therefore the means of communication must appeal to the audience. Whether in Drama, Prose or Poetry, the cardinal aim of a writer is to communicate with the readers. The template of the modern period is characterized by divisions, uncertainty, and confusion. Man in this era is caught in a quandary most times bemused and perplexed by the events that characterized his existence. Because of the unsure and erratic nature of the society in this period, even the dramaturgy of the era is correspondingly unsure. It is full of an ever escalating metaphor as its central social motif. This is because in the midst of the chaos and hyper social combat, the artist must find some means of documenting issues that permeates discourse and give it a social meaning. The dramatist must document the issues constructively, because for everything an artist writes about, he is writing about his social surrounding.

This therefore means that the language of communication and the socio-cultural issues in the writings should be known to the people. We posit so because language in any society is a dominant mode of communication and so for the people in any society to feel the impact of the message in any art work; it must be written in a language that embodies their social, political and cultural banners. This article is based on the influences of Bertolt Brecht's Political theatre techniques on African Playwrights, and how they have successfully used it as a carrier of social and aesthetic values in African Drama. We shall attempt to discuss their use of the Brechtian Theatre and his techniques to deconstruct the political in their plays such that the plays can make meaning to most of their readers both Africans and non-Africans alike.

This article is going to engage the works of two African Playwrights. The reason for the choice is to examine their different approaches to political issues within their societies and also to tease out their technical usage of the Brechtian dramatic

mode of presentation. The two playwrights whose works would be engaged in this research are: Francis Imbuga and Ola Rotimi. Certainly a little has been written about the influence(s) of Brecht in African drama. This article would seek to espouse the abilities of some African dramatists and how they have been able to utilize the theories of Bertolt Brecht, as a twin conveyor belt for carrying entertainment and reflecting political norms and values within the African society. The article reflects how some African playwrights have been able to domesticate Brecht's Theatre Theory to suit their vision and to help mould their works.

The research aims to elucidate on the sociological importance of drama as a tool for social change. But if that change must take place, then it must be determined by the level of social existence of the people. Because of this motive, therefore the playwright must write in the language that is easily understood by the people. If a playwright wishes to remain relevant in the Nigerian theatrical space, then his choice of language must be in consonance with the common language of the people. A failure to align forces with the popular language can lead to loss of relevance in the literary space. Dugga clearly alludes to this when he surmises that:

Crucial to the understanding of African literature is the contestation for space. Space for writing, space for what to write, space for reading, space for interpreting, and space for discourse. Each of these spaces may stand independently but many times overlap themselves with the scope of our configuration of issues in African literature (2005:6)

The above statement is a truism. This is because the various ideological contestations those different African writers are trying to project need some sort of space to regulate within, and this space is sociologically and culturally induced. The writing space in African literature is very wide, but only writers who know how to communicate, or who use the right techniques can successfully capture the imagination of the audience and the readers alike. The rationale for this statement is because as social beings men are constantly governed by social issues within their societies. Therefore for a work of art to be meaningful to them, it has to imbibe the social credo that forms the foundation of the society. Now understanding and embracing the social credo automatically means presenting the work of art in a language that is well received in that society.

Drama is believed universally to be an imitative narrative of the cultural, religious, social and political lives of a people (Turner, 1979). It is an artistic documentary of the daily occurrences within the community; Eagleton (2012) believes that the playwright is vested with the responsibility of capturing the metamorphic periods of change within the society for future reference and guidance in the society. How the playwright goes about documenting such issues determines how serious the people within the society would view his work. This therefore goes to say that the artistic work of a playwright is a reflection of the society from which he/ she emerges from. Wa Thiong'o (1981) sees the role of the writer (playwrights inclusive) as that of the seeker and guardian of the truth within the society. That it is incumbent on the playwright to always tow the side of the truth no matter how dangerous it may be. Ruganda (1992) on the other hand believes that the style of the playwright should form the basis upon which he hides the truth in the open, that the playwright should hide the truth behind the mask of laughter. It is in line with Ruganda's postulation that

Brecht in his seminal article 'Literature will be scrutinized' opined that the artists who write about the problems of the people and the injustices within their societies would be seen as the vanguards of true justice and saviours of humanity.

This article analyses the representation of political trends in Ola Rotimi's *If...* and Francis Imbuga's *Successor*, how both playwrights were able to write the truth about the political realities in their societies in the form of drama and how their writing styles helped them in creating awareness among their target audience. To be able to shed more light on the above, Brecht's Theory serves as the backdrop upon which our discourse would spring forth. Both plays address prevailing socio-political problems, both have a vein of comedy which makes their stark themes more palatable. Issues which engaged the attention of Rotimi and Imbuga are education, marriage, religion, political and social governance, health care, and class privilege(s). From their plays they are most angered by what they perceived as the exploitation of the working masses. Both playwrights have a serious socialist inclination in their writings, showing a clear refraction of their political ideologies and how they covertly or overtly intend to use their plays as tools to stir a political evolution in their countries and the continent as a whole. Rotimi and Imbuga therefore fall in the same class with other politically conscious playwrights like, George Bernard Shaw, Bertolt Brecht, Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Jane Littlewood among others. All of whom used their plays to effectively demonstrate the need for social change and fairness within their societies and the world as a whole.

Political drama traced back to the ancient Greeks, stage satires about those in authority was banned in the Greek republic after *The birds and lysistrata*; since then playwrights have used stages to convey messages, demand political action or change government policy and public opinion. Sophocles' *Antigone* is political: quoted by Aristotle on the loyalties of a citizen, adapted in 1944 by Anouilh setting it in the French resistance against the Nazis, while Brecht in 1948 made it more radically anti-Hitler (Potter, 2013).

Political Theatre Theory is the expression of strongly held beliefs, protesting at society or promoting a particular belief system. As politics is present in every corner of people's lives, political theatre includes party, gender, racial, sexual, animal, environmental and economic politics (Brecht, 1951). Brecht was so influential through his theories of estrangement; his works illustrate the effectiveness of staging politics. The parable of Hitler's rise to power is told through *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941), a small-time gangster in 1930's Chicago who takes advantage of economic turmoil to seize control of the greengrocer trade. In the same vein it is clear that the dramatic styles deployed by Rotimi and Imbuga in most of their plays have a hidden smack of symbolic political commentary. From *Kurumi* a historical political narrative of the Yoruba war General, to *Betrayal in the city* and all other plays written by this two (Rotimi and Imbuga) the constant under pinning message has been that of the desire for a politically balanced and people friendly society. To add credence to the above, Bracco (2012) opines that:

...the most rewarding piece of theatre is one that stimulates thought, opens dialogue and leaves people talking about the play for hours, days and even years. Revered playwrights- Shakespeare, Bertolt Brecht, Arthur Miller- all wrote political plays that jarred audiences. Political work will continue to be found on the stage because the theatre is an ideal place for compelling stories about the

complexities of the world in which we live... (p.1)

The two playwrights (Rotimi and Imbuga) have constantly relied on historical events and sources as a wealthy avenue from which they can draw their story lines from. Rotimi in Gbilekaa (1997) posits that:

...historical resources offer possibilities for matching human concern of the past with issues that pre-occupy us today. In drawing these parallels, the crucial question with which one is concerned is this. If despite obvious debilitating handicaps, our forebears were able to grapple with certain socio-political problems that threatened their survival why can't we their off springs, do better (sic)...(p.37)

The above quotation therefore enables us to see the perspectives of the playwrights, their reliance on historical happenings as a source for materials that they can use to reconstruct the present and the future. The worldview of the playwright and his class is recaptured in his dramatization of events within his society (Gbilekaa, 1997). The interpretation and choice of material(s) by the playwright would help the audience and readers of the play-text to understand the message in the play through the ideological visage of the playwright. Ambanasom (2010) claims that most African playwrights are influenced by the political lines and tensions that have become a permanent feature in the continents road to greatness, He states that the story lines are subtly charged to pit the masses against the greedy political oppressors or "exploiters against the exploited".

From the above, it is clear that no playwright writes from the void, Rotimi and Imbuga's plays therefore maintain their contemporaneity in terms of their immediate African setting and commentary as well as their timelessness within the world of responsible universal drama. The two playwrights wrote the plays on different ideological pedestals that have conveniently conveyed their message(s) to their target audience. Both playwrights have showed a firm commitment towards espousing the social, political and cultural inadequacies that have held the African continent in a choking grip (Gbilekaa, 1997). The reason for this approach in creating awareness through drama is because political theatre gives room for intellectual convenience, according to Kirby (1975) it deals with political ideas and concepts usually in an attempt to attack or support a particular political position it therefore dwells on the various elements of dramatic performance to reinforce the symbolic meanings and message for the benefit of the audience.

Classification of Characters in the Plays

Although they often seem like real people, dramatic characters are actually created in the mind of the playwright, who has wide latitude in how to present a character and in what to emphasize in projecting a character. A stage character can be drawn with a few quick strokes, as a cartoonist sketches a political figure; given the surface detail and reality of a photograph; or fleshed out with the more interpretive and fully rounded quality of a portrait in oils.

According to Wilson (2005) several major types of characters have proved effective in theatre. These include extraordinary characters who are in some way "larger than life"; representative or quintessential characters who are in many re-

spects typical or ordinary, but who are significant because they embody an entire group; stock characters who are not complete or three-dimensional and who exemplify one particular characteristic to the exclusion of virtually everything else; characters with a single dominant trait, or minor characters who appear briefly and serve chiefly to further the story of the major characters; narrators or choruses who comment on the action of the main story; and nonhuman characters. Characters are placed together by the playwright in certain combinations to obtain maximum effectiveness, and sometimes they are orchestrated to reinforce a theme in different manners.

In another sense of the term, the treatment of the character is the basic part of the playwright's work, conventions of the period and the author's personal vision will affect the treatment of character. Most plays contain major characters and minor characters. The delineation and development of major characters is essential to the play; the conflict between Sasia and Jandi in *The successor* or between Landlord and Garuba in *If...* depends upon the character of each. A minor character serves a specific function, to inform and aid in the development of the storyline. The distinction between major and minor characters is a vital aspect of the development of a storyline and the unravelling of the conflict in drama.

Basically, we divided the characters into groups for easy analysis and for the sake of dramatic aesthetics and symbolic representations. Playwrights use the traits of characters to help readers identify with the protagonists and the antagonists, to appreciate central themes, and propel the plots dramatic storyline. While it is easy to pass over the identifying features of the characters, there's usually a good reason the author included them in the text. Though all characterization is really about a character's personality, writers use two basic types of characterization to serve varying purposes. An astute reader is able to pick up on both forms and transform the written words into a deeper awareness of the nuances of the characters. It is based on these basic characterization methods that we can further analyze the character traits into Existentialist, Social and Messianic characters. For the purpose of our research in this chapter, we looked at characterization base on the two basic forms of characterization Direct and Indirect.

Direct characterization is mostly done by the playwright using deliberate means either through the character description in a stage direction or through the use of a narrator. The narrator directly tells the reader the character's personality. In order to qualify as direct characterization, the narrator must say something specific regarding the character's disposition and nature. This type of characterization is not found in dialogue, but rather in the stage direction and narration. Also, it only occurs when the playwright through the stage direction or the narrator identifies, without a doubt, the personality of a character. This type of characterization usually removes all doubt from the reader's mind regarding the said character. Therefore, if there is a biased narrator, then readers must be particularly cautious when considering the validity of the direct statement.

Indirect characterization, on the other hand, occurs when the stage directions or narrator does not come right out and tell the reader the personality of a character, but by reading between the lines an audience can guess the character's disposition based on certain criteria. It is actually far more common than direct characterization, but also much more complex. Indirect characterization can be found in dialogue as well as narration, and it is often intermingled with direct characterization, which

makes it difficult to locate and identify conclusively.

Based on the above, readers decipher a character's personality, but with indirect characterization it is never actually directly revealed. Stereotyping will certainly be used with indirect characterization, but most times that is exactly what the playwright wants the audience to imagine. Unlike with direct characterization, with indirect characterization there is no definitive revelation about a character's personality, so readers must rely on their own interpretation skills.

Use of Symbolism in the Plays

In 'Dialogue with a text' Probst (2007) explains, that if we accept the idea that literature ought to be significant, that readers have to assimilate it and work with it, that transforming it into knowledge is more significant than memorizing the definitions of technical terms, then we need to find some ways of bringing readers and text together, and of forcing upon readers the responsibility for making meaning of text. The best activities, then, is to encourage readers or the audience to make their own meaning out of what they read or watched and to discover for themselves the beauty of great literature. In practice, this procedure allows the readers or audience to choose objects and ideas on their own, and also to choose the significant symbols and themes in the play or text and are able to explore their meaning with little prompting or direction. Rotimi and Imbuga both used objects as symbols in their plays, below are some of the properties in the plays that have symbolic meanings that helped in the creation of meaning and shaping of the two stories. The playwrights used different symbolic items in the plays for example While Rotimi deploys the use of the imagery of the dry water tap, Imbuga effectively deploys the imagery of the dream in his play.

The Imagery of the Tap

Rotimi made a symbolic statement in the play *If...* by creating an imagery of a dry water tap in the compound. The tenants daily harbour a distant hope that one day water would gush out of the tap. It further represents the failure of the Nigerian government and by extension other African governments to provide their people with the best in terms of infrastructural development. The symbolic meaning of the Tap most especially towards the end of the play when the little boy (Onyema) hung his shirt on the dry tap before he was eventually killed by the brutality of the state police creates a dramatic imagery of despair and stagnation. The symbolic usage of the Tap casts an unwanted shadow of indictment on the Landlord who is a symbolic representation of the political class within the Nigerian society. The fluid style and mockingly high symbolism questions the certainties that paraded themselves as pillars of a cohesive society in a post civil war recovering society like Nigeria. The same imagery can be seen in the selfish and greedy character of Chief Oriomra in Imbuga's *The successor*. There is no difference between the character build up of The Landlord and Chief Oriomra, though both characters exist in time and space. Based on the creative works of the playwrights (Imbuga and Rotimi) we can still see the psychological shade of one in the other simply because they are both members of the African political ruling class.

The Imagery of the Dream

Imbuga employs the dream technique as a means of enhancing the storyline and cre-

ating the dramatic metaphor. The image of the Emperor's deceased father that became a constant feature in the dreams of the emperor has a connotative meaning; it suggests that the playwright is campaigning for a return to the roots. That he (Imbuga) is suggesting that the present crop of African leaders need to revisit the manifestos of the various founding fathers of the different independent African countries. The symbolic representation of the dream can equally mean the unknown change that is about to engulf the continent as a result of the constant romance between the African countries and the western and eastern world powers that control the political, social and economic activities across the world. Imbuga deploys one of the oldest methodologies in playwriting to achieve his aim; the dream sequence has been used by a number of playwrights across time for maximum effects in terms of creation of imagery. Playwrights like Shakespeare, Ibsen and Miller have all deployed the dream sequence to greater effect in some of their plays. Imbuga created a dream-like drama of chastisement that equally serves as a warning about the future that awaits the African continent and the African people; a future that is marred by political corruption and social mistrusts of the leaders by the followers. The semi-modern African state of Masero is a symbolic representation of many a modern African semi-democracy, the personal struggle for power by Chief Oriomra and the gullible chief Sasia clearly depicts the dubious scheming that has become the other of the day among most political office holders across the continent of Africa. It is this type of greedy and gullible attitude among the political class on the continent that Imbuga is trying to allude to in the play. Brecht in A short organum for the theatre (1949) in Brecht on theatre: The development of an aesthetics (1964) arrives at the same conclusion when he states that:

...for those who are constructing society it sets out society's experiences, past and present alike, in such a manner that the audience can appreciate the feelings, insights and impulses which are distilled by the wisest, most active and most passionate among us from the events of the day or the century. They must entertain with the wisdom that comes from the solution of the problems, with the anger that is a practical expression of sympathy with the underdog, with the respect due to those who respect humanity; or rather whatever is kind to humanity... (p.5)

From the above, it is clear that Brecht speaks in support of the ageless and timeless works of the playwrights who transcended time and epochs to write about the need for equity, justice and fairness to all people. He believes that any responsible playwright would never forget to draw from the historical accuracies or inaccuracies for the creation of solutions to the problems of the present and the enhancement of a better future society. His observations have been concretized in Imbuga's The successor. The futuristic symbolism of the seer (Dr. See Through) and the hunting night visions of Emperor Chonda, are warnings for the society to leave a peaceful live with one another.

The Tenants

Rotimi's dramatic choice of a tenement building as the locale within which most events in the play (If...) would take place has a symbolic connotation to it. The choice of tenants reflects the major tribes in Nigeria as we can relate their names (Chinwe to

Ibo, Hamidu to Hausa, Ukot to Niger delta, Garuba to Hausa and Banji Falegan to Yoruba) to the major Nigerian tribes and Regions. It is therefore safe to say that based on the Marxist ideological position of the playwright and his vociferous commentary about the events in the country during the 1979 elections, he has used his poetic license to write a play that depicts the situation that was obtainable during the build up to the elections that gave birth to the third republic in Nigeria (1979). The silent revolt of the Tenants against the instructions of the Landlord and the tragic demise of Mama as a result of lack of medical facilities to treat her ailment, coupled with the death of the young and very promising Onyema as a result of the ruthlessness of the policemen paints a picture of the dissolution that engulfed the people as a result of the corrupt practices of the leaders. It also symbolically painted the picture of the inhuman nature of the post independent African leaders.

Themes in the Plays; *If...* and *The Successor*

The subject matter of most literary endeavours are deeply engrained in the socio-political and cultural sphere from which they are written, though most times it is also infinitely possible to relate the subject matters to the larger experiences of the wider and more cosmopolitan universe that forms a bigger template for the writer (Brecht 1948; Darah 2008; Nnolim, 2009). The thematic preoccupations of most playwrights are normally born out of the ever-present experiences of the daily happenings within their local, national and international environment as a result of which, it is easy to associate the subject matters in the plays with the epochal events that were prevalent when the said play was written. It is as a result of such universality in terms of the themes that the plays can be meaningful to different readers or audiences across the universe (Iji 1996; Zettersten, 1983). To help our discourse in the issues of political and social issues in African drama, we will look at some of the remote themes in the plays of Ola Rotimi and Francis Imbuga. These include:

Leadership Problem

The subject matter of leadership has carved a niche for itself in the different genres of African literature. From the period of independence, most African countries had been bedevilled by different forms of leadership crises. As a result of this sad development, African writers have always found a way of prominently featuring the open and smelly sore of leadership in their various works. From Achebe's *A man of the people*, Soyinka's *Death and the king's horseman*, Ngugi's *I will marry when I want*, Fugard's *The island* and a host of other literary works by other prominent and new writers across the African continent, the issue of leadership has become a constant aspect in the art works. Rotimi and Imbuga have also spared some space in their works to make their contributions on the issue of social, political, religious and other forms of leadership that are found on the African continent. A clear example of the struggle for leadership can be seen in Imbuga's play *The successor* when Chief Oriomra almost schemed his way to the become the Successor to the Throne. He connived against Chief Jandi, by forcing Zira to accuse him of impregnating her. Fortunately Zira and Sasia found out in time and turned the table against the greedy and evil hearted Chief Oriomra.

Imbuga used the character of Chief Oriomra to paint a clear picture of the greedy and dirty politics that runs round the corridors of power, and how it usually ends in a tragic way for the leader or the led. In tandem with Imbuga's depiction of

selfish politicians and leaders, Rotimi's depiction of the Landlord who gave his tenants quit notices so as to force them to vote for his political party during the national elections equally shows that the issue of forceful and deceptive leaders is a common phenomenon across the continent.

To create a balance of dramatic forces, Rotimi and Imbuga also created protagonists who saw through the ruse of the two antagonists (Chief Oriomra and Landlord). Imbuga had Diviner See Through and Jandi as good characters in the play while Rotimi created a pious character in the person of Papa the Old Teacher and Hamidu alias Che Guevara. The postulation at the end is that there is still hope for the political and social leadership on the African continent. That not all leaders are bad and so the future of the continent and humanity in general is not very bad.

Social Justice

One of the major issues on the front banner in African drama is the continuous search for social equality and an end to all forms of injustices weather political, cultural or social. Most playwrights across the continent have made the issue of social equality and justice one of their constant subject matter. This is because of the different cultural and socio-political experiences that have made Africa as a continent and a people unique from the rest of the world. Femi Osofisan the Nigerian Dramatist Highlighted the issue of social justice in one of his plays Red is the freedom road, Ebrahim Hussein the Tanzanian, made an explicit commentary about social injustices of the colonialists in Kinjekitile. Like Osofisan and Hussein, Rotimi and Imbuga are repainting the issues of injustices that have become a permanent feature in their communities and the larger African society. The tragic aspects of social and political injustices that have become common place across the continent; are born out of the historical injustices that have become a constant feature around the continent over time. Adolfo Sanchez Vasquez in Art and society: Essays in Marxist aesthetics (1973) relates to the above when he mentions that all humanity is on a historical ground and that all conflicts are not waged among human beings and communities but differences in social ideas and statutes.

In conclusion, drama does change the way people think, as a result of which new ways of thinking and political and social relations in governance and public relations are born. The playwright who is seen as the vanguard of his society is always quick to point out in his dramaturgic approach which systems of political relations needs to be changed. From the relationship between content and style, to the context in which the performance is delivered, the ultimate aim of most dramatic performances is to pose political questions and problems and attempt to change the beliefs and opinions of the spectator (Kirby, 1975). Arising from this analogy therefore, we can safely view the dramatic texts analyzed in this chapter as literary commentaries that are aimed towards changing or creating new perspectives to the spectator in terms of political and social relations within the immediate environment. Barber (1997) adds to the above position when she opines that:

...Art forms do not merely reflect an already — constituted consciousness, giving us a window onto something already fully present. They are themselves important means through which consciousness is articulated and communicated. In times of rapid social change, it seems likely that popular art forms, with their exceptional mobility (whether through technology such as the radio,

record, and cassette tape, or through physical transportation from place to place by travelling performing groups) will play a crucial role in formulating new ways of looking at things... (p.4)

Barber captures the essence of the politics of playwriting and the reasons for the evolution of the playwright as the vanguard of the society and the silent voice of constant reminder that the society relies upon. This is because one of the duties of the playwright in an ever evolving political society is to serve as the writer of truth and socio-political conscience of the society. From the foregoing it is clear that in the midst of the aesthetics of the playwrights craft, he /she would always find a way of reminding the society which he/ she serves of the need for constant political and social balance. This therefore takes us to Ngugi's Decolonizing the mind (1982) when he opines that all writers are writers in politics it depends on what type of politics and the side of the divide that the writer chooses.

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