

The Social Consciousness of Postmodernist Literature: A Case of Imbuga's *the Return of Mgofu*

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Abstract

Literature plays a paramount social function in transforming our society. Despite Francis Imbuga being a postmodernist advocate and his popularity in telling the truth laughingly having flourished in Africa and abroad his play *The Return of Mgofu* has not received much scholarly attention. This is despite social transformation of postmodernist drama being the subject of reference for societal corrective measure. The study interrogates the social consciousness of postmodernist literature in Francis Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu*. The study is grounded on the premise that the postmodernists have sensitised individuals and groups to thrive in artistic expression. Postmodernists proposition that there are no distinctive ways of literary presentation by artists. Therefore, this unique transformative role of postmodernist literature is a critical study especially when it comes to the genre of drama. The study on social consciousness of postmodernist literature in Francis Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* was guided by postmodern literary theory. The study objective was to underscore the relevance of Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* to the contemporary society. The study employed qualitative research paradigm which involves data collection procedures that result in open ended non numeric data. This was analyzed using non statistical methods. We employed a design of intrinsic case study which is intended to bring forth an intrinsic nature of a particular case in which, Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* itself was of great interest to the researcher. This was supplemented by a method of content analysis to collect secondary data concerning Francis Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu*. This was done imaginatively in order to internalize Imbuga's drama as the main source of data of the research. Consequentially, research revealed that social consciousness in Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* exposes existential crisis. Imbuga being the artist is powerless and he plays within the chaos which is the only course against defeat. Social consciousness was mainly identified through Imbuga's idiosyncrasy of tending to tell the truth laughingly. Upon which, the study concluded that literary knowledge and truth as commended by artists is as a result of social, historical or political reasons which are contextual since these are constructed to varying degrees depending on the inspiration of the artist. The study attempts to fill the Lacuna existing in social consciousness of postmodernist drama.

Keywords: **Literature** refers to all creative works of man that exhibit the characteristics of accurate observation of environment, vivid imagination and ingenious use of language. Imbuga's play, *The Return of Mgofu* is a literary work in the sense that, it exhibits the playwright's accurate observation of our global and national environment and he vividly imagined their issues of concern and tends to address them creatively through use of language. **African literature** refers to the study of different genres of African literature; geographically, generationally, historically, economically, culturally, politically and spiritually as presented by African authors within or outside Africa. The play in study Imbuga's *The Return of Mgofu* is an African play written within African continent geographically. It reflects and addresses African contemporary era generation visions and aspirations in relation to their history, economic factor, culture, political and spiritual needs. **Drama** refers to action.

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Drama therefore, is the presentation of character in action and written plays develop the dramatic action around the characters, plot and incident that are presented in structurally well developed pattern of construction. *The Return of Mgofu* is one of Imbuga's plays which seem quite popular with the drama in the contemporary era. **Postmodern text** is a text that employs fragmentariness with no central narrative arch and employs pastiche to fold in elements from popular genre such as parody, paradox and playfulness. Francis Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* employs fragmentation to communicate the realities of contemporary hence, transform the chaotic societies. **Postmodernist literature** refers to literature that sees fragmentation and extreme subjectivity as an existential crisis and it demonstrates that this chaos is undefeatable. The artist is powerless and the only resort against ruin is to play within the chaos. Imbuga plays within the chaos and that way Mndika leader Mhando invites his members of the inner circle who after a close deliberation realises where they went wrong and through invitation of son of Mgofu Ngoda home, peace is restored in Mndika state.

Introduction

According to Aristotle in his book the *Poetics* drama is the presentation of characters in action. By action Aristotle means the 'what' and 'why' of the characters behaviour and action. He does not mean mere physical movement on stage. African drama emphasises the inner motives that drive characters to behave in a particular way. Characters in African drama are employed to develop the plot and communicate the playwright's concerns. African drama is presented in narrative. Narration is African aesthetic of presenting drama since it makes their plays look African authentically with the aesthetics of African oral literature incorporated in their plays. This study comes in such a time when literature needs to shape the contemporary society especially during this era of digital and modern technology. In the contemporary society, there is a felt need to answer some questions on the transformative role of the postmodernist literature. This is so because literature is the mirror of the society and this is reflected in the ever changing roles of the literary artists.

Imbuga is the African most popular prolific playwright and was born in a modest background in Wenyange village in Vihiga County in the year 1947. He attended Chavakali intermediate primary school, Alliance High school, the University of Nairobi for his undergraduate and post graduate in literature and obtained his PhD in 1992 from the University of Iowa.

Imbuga worked as the professor of literature at Kenyatta University; did postgraduate work at university of Wale in Cardiff, University of Ghana in Legon and University of Ibadan. He was the first director of the polyvalent theatre workshop for Africa and the director of UNESCO'S children's Drama Project for Kenya. Imbuga was a playwright actor and play competition adjudicator. He determined the action through leading for the rising playwrights. Imbuga has published over five plays which are being frequently and widely performed and studied in Africa and Abroad in educational institutions.

Though Francis Imbuga a Kenyan playwright wrote most of his works during the postcolonial, he is a non conformist to Aristotle's realistic conventions of presenting drama. He was influenced by Bertolt Brecht way of presenting drama which embraces postmodernist conventions. Under the postmodernist approach literature is interpreted from the point of view of its social function of restoring, interpreting and transmitting the values of a given society. Similarly society is viewed as the foundation upon which literature is created. This position is made explicit by (Hermeren, 1975) observation that: "works of art are not created in a vacuum. Every work of art is surrounded by what might be its artistic field...political and social structure. All these may influence the creation of works of art"(p.3).

We limited our study to postmodernist approach by John(1967)and Drucker(1957) to investigate the social consciousness of postmodernist drama in Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* in terms of; character construction, language structure and techniques of style. This is because they take great interest in literature and the contemporary society.

Their beliefs and practices are personal rather than being identifiable with a particular establishment or special interest groups. Imbuga's views as portrayed in his play *The Return of Mgofu* are not identifiable with a special interest group rather generally addresses our chaotic societies. Under postmodernist philosophy, literature is interpreted from the point of view of the society as the foundation upon which literature is created. Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* contextually is set in a devastating Mndika nation.

Postmodernists posit truth as a contrived illusion misused by people and special interest groups to gain power over others. Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* demonstrates how Mndika nationalists engage in blame games and prejudices to evade truth of the cause of calamities in Mndika nation. Postmodernists claim that facts are too limiting to determine anything. By this they imply that, what is a fact today can be false tomorrow. They therefore, prefer to rely on opinions rather than embrace facts.

Hutcheon (2004) purports that postmodernist literature is that literature that is characterized by; no clear plot, no central arc, unreliable narrators, ironic quotes, playfulness and tongue in cheek in order to communicate the realities of the time. However, they have a serious subject and a complex structure. Tim O'Brien a postmodernist scholar in his text entitled *The Things They Carried* which is a collection of many stories, in one of the stories entitled; *How to Tell a True War Story* O'Brien raises the societal conscious of telling a true war story. He explores a character by the name "Tim O'Brien" a Vietnam veteran. The story line revolves around one platoon's experience during Vietnam War. The text is a work of fiction and O'Brien invites us to criticise the fictionality of characters and incidents throughout the entire text. The text also questions the nature of telling stories. The narrator asserts that factual retelling of war stories would be unbelievable and heroic and moral war stories do not capture the truth. Authors seem to suggest that the only way to enhance peace globally and in Africa is to consider ontological views.

Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* is one play that cannot be ignored by the current signs of the time. Imbuga used theatre for revolution by alienating spectators from the stage action so that they could think critically and change their lives. His political beliefs and experiences motivated him to try to change the world through his drama. Imbuga wrote his plays to shed light on the injustices of our societies. Andre (1991) argues that the role of the artist is not to perpetuate the chaos rather; he or she should dramatize the best solution possible. Our study went beyond by exploring how Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* being a postmodernist text transforms our chaotic societies. It attempts to demonstrate how postmodernist invention of a new style (fragmentation) to communicate the realities of time tends to sensitise and transform the egocentric governed societies where unrests and chaos are on the rise.

Imbuga tends to embrace narration in his play *The Return of Mgofu* a technique he invents to demonstrate alternative realism. In fact investigating social consciousness aspect in the play *The Return of Mgofu* seems compelling when the text in question emanates from a society governed by egocentrism, tribalism, corruption and materialism

Discussions

The study employed critical content analysis method to collect data from the relevant context which is; social consciousness as an aspect of postmodernist literature. Our data collection and analysis was limited to various manifestations of social consciousness, as portrayed in *The Return of Mgofu*. The results obtained were open ended and were analyzed using non statistical methods of summarising. The results are valid and accurate in the sense that we assumed an active participation in reading and interpretation of the play before analysis. We acknowledged every source which gave insight to the study and the data was collected from published sources. We deduced Imbuga's aspects of language such as; sentence structure, grammar and stylistic devices which manifest social consciousness evidenced in the play and gave interpretation of how they enwrapped the relevancy of the play.

Mhando reminds the Sujas that they should not assume the fact that there has been shedding of innocent blood in Mndika. They need to look for a solution by avoiding prejudices. Your Majesty, it's true what Suja Mdanya has said. But he is forgetting one thing. The colonialists left us many, many years ago. For how long shall we blame them for our shortcomings? For how long shall we blame people of Suguta for our woes? Yes? For how long shall we blame fate for where we are?(p.43).

Imbuga depicts character Mdanya as being too quick to evade and ignore the practical causes of calamities such as the shedding of the innocent blood by their forefathers and engaging in blame games. Imbuga vividly sensitizes nationalists on the need to stop blame games, prejudices and other unfolded claims to superiority and exceptionalism that characterises our society leading to chaos. Imbuga tends to draw nationalists attention to the many times we mishandle systems of leadership, ignore our responsibilities in our work places and misuse our powers. Sometimes we engage in taking bribes, under working, or even giving our relatives first priority in job opportunities regardless of their qualification but simply because they have a tall relative. Other times we render poor services but when the systems become unproductive we are the first to raise alarm and quick to blame others for our own shortcomings.

Imbuga demonstrates that such acts may lead to chaos in a peaceful society or raise the chaos in a chaotic society setting a nation ablaze. Imbuga demonstrates how we ought to exercise integrity and professionalism in whichever rank of the office we render our services.

We lived happily in the three ridges until that night, when a dredged man or woman set a neighbor's house on fire. No one bothered to know who had done and why, many houses were burnt and everyone ran northwards. Thori and I ran to the shrine. We opened the gate to the great cave and let people in. All handled together in unnatural silence. But before we opened the cave something even more unnatural happened that night. That same night the dreadful eternal darkness caught up with all of us. To think the sacred cave would be safe was unwise. That same night they followed us to the shrine. Get out they shouted. We have come to protect you... Those who obeyed were killed. Those who chose to stay in the cave were burnt to death (p.5).

Imbuga depicts Mndika nationalists destroying property due to ideological differences. He portrays those in power as being above the law since when they destroy property nobody bothers to point an accusing finger. Imbuga tends to satirise the act of destroying property as a way of airing grievances and he dramatises the amicable ways of addressing such grievances.

We tend to have sprung from societal institutions whereby people are poorly cultured on how to air out grievances and leaders tend to act as if they are above the law. This misguiding one sided culture seems to have started with the grownups and now has cropped to the teenagers.

We have witnessed cases whereby nationalist eliminate their brothers and sisters due to ideological differences. Civil servants when not paid or have grievances, resort in violence demonstration. Students in our institutions have also copied the same practises and exercise them in learning institutions. Children in addition, have inculcated the misguiding culture of which when their needs are not met some resolve to suicide or even they destroy their parents property. This poor mentorship has spread across the continent and globally.

Imbuga tends to demonstrate that the turning point can only be reached by our children and their children by appreciating the future by correcting the mistakes of the past. Imbuga tends to demonstrate the need to discourage such practises and he pinpoints the elderly people role to correctly mentor young generation who learn from them since the repercussions are not amusing. Hence, the digital generation of the contemporary society has a responsibility to eradicate tribalism and violent ways of airing grievances especially having been shaped by education. Imbuga tends to sensitise young people not to accept to be bought to shed blood especially when it comes to airing out the masses views but embrace amicable ways of solving conflicts. This is because two wrongs do not make a right. Imbuga emphasises on respect for human blood and minding on our brother's welfare.

Thank you for giving me this chance Mister Chairman. As you know, my uncle is the best blacksmith around here. With your permission I could ask him to make enough bows and arrows for the job. (Listens to others before he speaks.) I beg your pardon? Yes, you are right, he will need funding. (pause) Fifty thousand will not be enough for the weapons, Mister Chairman; I suggest one hundred and fifty. (Listens to others.) Thank you very much Mister Chairman. Yes... you can't fight with us... come for the spoils...yes... He is about to go back to normal sleep when he suddenly relapse into sleep talk.) That is a very good idea, the radio. The radio would be an effective tool (Listens to other voices). No! No! No! Not national. We must go local. I mean vernacular, mother tongue. Yes, mother tongue, vernacular. (He relapses into sleep.) (P.25).

Imbuga depicts Mndika nationalists as very corrupt and bribable when a tender for making weapons is extended to relatives of the sidekicks in the leadership. Imbuga depicts lack of integrity and misuse of power of Mndika leaders when the weapons highly purchased are spoiled ones. Imbuga depicts their height of oppressing the masses when they turn radio to vernacular to misappropriate the nation funds. Imbuga does not perpetuate corruption and tribalism in the above quote as Mndika leaders exploit, oppress, and discriminates the masses. Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* serves the contemporary right in that in Africa continent we are products of societies whereby leaders have lost their integrity. They no longer respect the people they serve like the Mndika leaders. In our nations it is not a surprise to witness servants (leaders) insulting; misusing and exploiting the people they serve for their selfish gains.

Imbuga demonstrates that such a practice deprives a leader of the virtue of being a human being to that of an ogre (an animal. This reminds nationalists of refrain from behaviors which tend to depict them as inhuman. Imbuga tends to invite us to embrace the virtue of being servants which should intrinsically come from us.

Imbuga tends to sensitise national leaders to cherish the virtue of servant-ship by; fostering accountability, transparency, diplomacy, integrity, dignity and loyalty to their people. Imbuga tends to sensitise our nation Kenya which has been divided by multipartisan; national leaders ought to embrace the fact that multipartisan was started to foster democracy and democracy ought to unite nationalists rather than divide them. Imbuga tends to advise the flag bearers to embrace dialogue and come to consensus that way maintain peace and unity in our country.

Two creatures with a human feature except for the horns on their heads enter. They are joined at their necks with a long rope. As soon as they enter each one is attracted by a totem placed at the opposite ends of the stage. Since the rope is not long enough and they are moving in opposite directions, each narrowly misses the target of the totem ahead. The struggle to achieve their target is mimed to the accompaniment of appropriate sound effects. Exhausted, they sit down to rest. Eventually they fall asleep. Suddenly, one of them appears to dream and sleep walk. He stands up, furiously trying to remove the horns from his head. When he finally succeeds, he shakes his head vigorously as if to confirm that he no longer has horns. Gradually he calms down and begins to survey his environment...(p.64).

Imbuga depicts how people with unity of purpose mind about their brothers welfare and are selfless through his dramatised performance which literary is a fragment. Imbuga's rope symbolises the same origin of human beings. The horns symbolise the literal metamorphosis human beings undergo when they become selfish and materialistic. This deprives them the virtue of being humane to that of ogre. Imbuga through his dramatised performance demonstrates genres previously deemed not fit for literature have their own literariness.

Imbuga tends to sensitise upcoming artists who have attempted to venture in the literary artistic expression to embrace the fact that literature is evolving and the artist standards should merge with the technology. This is as a result of the popular culture having emerged in the literary flat form of several genres like the combination of the past styles and the recent styles has become popular.

Imbuga demonstrates how we need to decolonise our minds in the perception of what we regard as distinct ways of presenting literature through his dramatised performance. We need to decolonise our perception of genres which should be fit for literature owing to the fact that we live in the era of different cultures and multiculturalism need to shape our contemporary literature.

Dawn is breaking at Mgofu Ngoda's Shrine, people of my motherland, welcome once again. I trust that you had a restful night. Yes Mgofu, we slept well. That's good. Nora, my daughter returned from her studies last night just after you retired to bed. She has been away for three years. I greet you, people of our motherland. We greet you too our daughter. Nora...we named her after the woman who gave birth to me right here at this shrine. (visibly mused). That was soon after my father's death. He was buried under that fig tree over there, where the sick sit(p.56).

Imbuga depicts the son of the great blind seer as very hospitable and minding on others welfare. Imbuga demonstrates Mgofu's enlightenment when he empowers women for instance his daughter Nora Ulivaho. When Mhando sends emissaries to invite him back home he receives them with open arms and offers them a shelter. This depicts him as forgiving. Imbuga tends to invite nationalists to embrace burying the hatchet and striving to inculcate peace love and unity in their societies. Such virtues could bring order to the chaotic societies. Imbuga depicts the importance of education which broadens the scope of any just society where the welfare of both genders counts.

Imbuga's play is quite vital to the contemporary society; *The Return of Mgofu* being a postmodernist work focuses on identity issues Imbuga demonstrates in his play that his concern in female characters is not of patriarchy, polygamy, or domination of women, but generally he is concerned with identity issues of both men and women to bring co-operation in exhibiting international cohesion which enhances just governance and peace in our societies.

Hence, this helps our contemporary literary writers to change their perspective on how to depict female characters while writing literary works especially by looking at possibilities in which they can transform the society but not patriarchy or liberation issues.

We opened the gate to the great cave and let people in. All handled together in unnatural silence. But before we opened the cave something even more unnatural happened that night. That same night the dreadful eternal darkness caught up with all of us. To think the sacred cave would be safe was unwise. That same night they followed us to the shrine. Get out they shouted. We have come to protect you... Those who obeyed were killed. Those who chose to stay in the cave were burnt to death(p.8).

Imbuga portrays Mndika nationalists extending their grievances to burn sacred places and to even send the blind seer in exile. Imbuga demonstrates the wages of practising such injustices when Mndika nation is inflicted with calamities throughout. Imbuga's play *The Return of Mgofu* comes in such a time when people globally and in African nation have overlooked the role of sacred places and also the sacred role played by the religious. It has come such a time when people have neglected such holy and sacred places and even to an extent of misusing them. People have burnt sacred places and others have made them trading centers; globally, in Africa and in our own nation. Others have used God's name for material gains. Imbuga tends to invite us to respect what is godly.

Conclusion

Imbuga in his play *The Return of Mgofu* tends to demonstrate that facts exist outside the process of speaking them. This becomes an awakening step of the condemned national leaders and all the nationalists to strive to act responsibly in their responsibility and not overlooking any serious problem. Mhando strives to bring Mgofu back home and restores peace in Mndika state and the culture of respect for the death is instilled.

From Imbuga's dramatised performance policy makers/leaders learn on seeking solutions that cherish respect, integrity and peace. Imbuga tends to invite us to embrace dialogue in solving our societal chaos amicably. Imbuga therefore, informs future leaders to embrace dialogue in exercising leadership which attracts democracy and how this would respect different ideologies which individual leaders might have despite having to work for a common agenda for progress of our nations.

Imbuga rejects the coining of language to exploit people, he points that leaders are bound to serve. He tends to sensitise our societies to consider alternative strategies of inculcating good leadership skills to our leaders. This is by first leaders understanding their responsibility of serving the nation. Imbuga demonstrates the value of human blood and the bond between Africans past and present, thus he depicts postmodernist fragmentariness of communicating the realities of times. Through his characters he tends to sensitise the state on how to apply wisdom to solve conflicts amicably in the chaotic societies.

Music and drumming comments on the virtue of forgiveness and it ridicules the vice of decline of moral values. Imbuga highlights decline of moral values and problematizes consequences of repeating the same. Imbuga tends to sensitise the society on amicable alternative ways of solving chaos in conflicting societies. Imbuga tends to sensitise literary critiques on the perception of genres which should be fit for literature owing to the fact that we live in the era of different cultures and multiculturalism has shaped our contemporary literature. No wonder Ngugi ascertained that, 'let a thousand flowers bloom'.

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