

The coming of age of people and nations



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In her essay “ Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey argues that a movie audience derives pleasure from the artform by identifying themselves in the characters on screen (Mulvey, 3). Like cinema, the theatre isolates the audience, making the confrontation strictly between them and the world of the narrative in the dark room. It becomes very natural for the audience to be emotionally engulfed and for the lines between theatre and real life to blur. The effectiveness of political theatre rests on its potential to capitalize on the audience’s sympathy and emotional bond with the cause being presented. Exhibiting the issue as an intellectual argument is insufficient. Rather, theater and film are most powerful when provoking an unsettling emotional disturbance within the audience. Because the audience has projected their own understanding of themselves on the primary protagonists, when those characters come under attack, the audience is also distressed. Likewise, they will feel a shared responsibility to fight back against the exposed issue. In support of this notion, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s play *I Will Marry when I Want* achieves the agenda of political theatre through a process of identifying the characters with the audience and then transforming those characters to reveal the premises of oppression surrounding them. This structure compels the audience to act in response to the exposed issues. In order to include the audience in the political struggle, the initial characterization presented needs to be approachable. The audience should be able to effortlessly connect with the way that the characters express themselves; a relationship that Wa Thiong’o specifically struggles to achieve in *I Will Marry when I Want*. The main protagonists, Kiguunda and Wangeci, are poor peasants with a small plot of land. They are a loving family, despite their occasional bickering, and struggle financially to

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make ends meet. Their humble position in society and their conflicts are very similar to those of most people and thus, become a significant common point of departure. Characters like Kiguunda and Wangeci, as well as Gicaamba and Njooki, are unremarkable and far from perfect, but the strength of their nationalism and loyalty are still evident in their courageous defiance against the Kiois. This balance of flaws and virtues renders an even more human and vulnerable characterization that compels the audience to sympathize with them. The way that these characters express their feelings and ideas is also significant. In the reenactment of Gicaamba and Njooki's wedding, when Ngugi utilizes language the style is simple and unpretentious. In a society where theatre was dominated by the works of George Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare, Wa Thiong'o takes a unique approach to the aesthetic exemplification of language. His use of stylistic devices are very approachable and easily understandable for the audience. The imagery is usually that of nature and a primitive lifestyle, manifest in metaphors and similes that refer to " gourds of honey," " hills and slopes," and " millet grains" (Wa Thiong'o, 65-66). Through his heavy use of song and dance, the playwright finds a different but equally relatable avenue through which he can express ideas and emotions. In the reenactment of Gicaamba and Njooki's wedding and many other scenes, soloists, dancers and choruses come in to join the actors in a musical number. Like natural imagery, song and dance is a feature of performance art that is easily understandable to the audience, because it is a significant part of their rituals and community activities and an integral medium of communication. (Wa Thiong'o, 45) Upon investing their sympathy and a portion of their own self-identity in the protagonists, the psychological coming of age and tainting realization of

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those characters would thus causes the audience to become deeply disturbed. In emphasizing this process in the storyline, the emotion vested in the last scene is also significant in presenting this transformation. After crying about how Gathoni is now pregnant and working at a bar, Kiguunda destroys the pictures and inscribed board, while Wangeci screams for him to “ Kill me now (...) then he can have meat for dinner” (Wa Thiong’o, 110). This is a shocking portrayal of the family’s current state – a far cry from the beginning of the story when they were portrayed as quiet and supportive. The concept of virginity and marriage is also a primitivist symbol and motif in the play. A woman’s maidenhood is her most valuable treasure; likewise it is a metaphorical symbol of Kenya’s freedom from oppression. The youth and purity of virginity is also a motif for the primitivist notion of Kenya’s cultural integrity and traditional values. The motif is established by the phrase “ I will marry when I want,” which was sung by a drunk and then by Kiguunda, coupled with the words “ while all the padres are still alive ... while all the nuns are still alive” (3). The imagery of padres and nuns signifies purity, and the diction “ still” suggests the regressive nature of that virtue. The symbol insinuates that the sovereignty and prerogative to marry freely is only obtainable while Kenya is still in its pure, primitivist and empowered position. Later, Thiong’o alludes to the fragility of innocence and virginity in the lyrics “ Maiden lend me your precious treasures ... and when you lose your head you’ll never find it again” (12). In the beginning of the play, Gathoni powerfully exclaims that “ I will mary when I want!” (16) and runs away to Mombasa with Muhuuni in the heat of love. However, by the end, Gathoni is pregnant and abandoned by Muhuuni. Muhuuni tricked her into pregnancy by saying that he would not marry a girl who is not pregnant because that

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might mean that she is barren. Thus, Gathoni not only loses her virginity, but also the prerogative to marry when she wants because the situation would force her into a shotgun wedding at best. The audience's identity is vested in these characters' transformations, thus they suffer these disappointments alongside Gathoni. Coupled with the lurid imagery of Gathoni's emotional conflict and oppression, the audience is compelled to sympathize with her and question a society that would allow such a deplorable abomination.

Despite inciting the emotional shock stated above, the play does not provide the solution to those issues within itself, thus compelling the audience to find that solution through their lives. Theatre presents the realization and leads the audience back straight to reality where they left off before they entered the theatre. In *I Will Marry when I Want*, the conflict in Kiguunda's family and Gathoni's possible marriage to John Muhuuni is a metaphor for the colonial rule of Kenya. The conflicts are condensed into approachable symbols of the political problems in the country, even after their independence. One example is when the Kiois come into the room and one of them causes the title deed to fall. Gicaamba eventually picks it up and hangs it back on the wall (42). The title deed is proof of Kiguunda's ownership of the land.

Likewise, it is a symbol of freedom because "these are mine own" (4) and on this land he has the autonomy and prerogative to live freely without being oppressed. This same freedom is threatened by the Kiois' arrival and attempt to colonize the lives of people like Kiguunda by coercing them into selling their land and forcing them into Christian marriage customs, the cost of which eventually lead them to lose the title deed. This twisted situation mirrors Kenya's condition at a time where the country's cultural identity is being forcefully compromised, not by colonizers, but by their own brethren

who have blindly sworn their loyalty to external bourgeois elements. The play concludes at the apex of this conflict and with a realization of the solution. Gicaamba states, “ Let’s not fight amongst ourselves” (110) and implores his countrymen to unite against the real enemy, “ Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru ... The Oppressor, Son of Grab-and-Take.” (111). Coupled with the audience’s emotional connection with Kiguunda and Wangeci, they are thrust into the same motivation to action against the real enemy. Like Kiguunda and Wangeci, the audience is only in the beginning of the fight to reclaim their cultural identity. Despite its national independence, Kenya is very much still colonized by the ideologies of the West and the economic dominance validated by those ‘ superior’ nations. History and society were dictated from the point of view of the petit-bourgeois, and theatre was presented sparingly as a luxury to the people. It was “ confined within walls” and given only “ if they [the people] behaved themselves” (Wa Thiong’o, 41). The play compels the realization that empowerment is necessary for Kenya’s cultural integrity, but as for the answer to this problem, the audience is now invigorated to seek it for themselves in reality. An effective way to accomplish political agenda through theatre and compelling an audience to act upon a cause is by including them in the fight. A playwright can therefore portray the transformation of the characters as they recognize their oppression and empower themselves. By exposing the disturbing justice of reality on stage brings the audience closer to the characters and induces a non-cathartic emotional connection with the audience which in turn compels them to take an active political stance. Through this method, the playwright blurs the line between a sad story and an unsettling reality, thus driving home the sense of urgency with which the audience is invited to

act. Bibliography: Mulvey, Laura. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. 1999. Ngũgĩ, Wa Thiong'o. Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature. London: J. Currey, 1986. Ngũgĩ, Wa Thiong'o., and Wa Mĩrĩ. Ngũgĩ. I Will Marry When I Want. London: Heinemann, 1984.