

THE DRAMATURGY OF VIOLENCE IN AFRICA: A STUDY OF SELECTED PLAYS

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Abstract

The theatre provides a vent for playwrights to express our common humanity by highlighting the problems that confront society. In today's world, one of such problems is violence. It is the contention of this paper that violence occurs where there is no equity. State terrorism and the absence of the rule of law can also lead to anarchy and violence. Joblessness and the denial of equal opportunities can also result into violence. By dramatising violence, playwrights do not only seek to portray the violent nature of man but at the same time seek ways of bringing about peace, more so that the audience shares the traumatic experience of victims of violence. Drawing our examples from *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, *Once upon Four Robbers* and *Hangmen Also Die*, the paper uses the qualitative methodology at arriving at these findings. The paper concludes that the dramatisation of violence throws up moral and ethical questions and that when playwrights use violence with moral consciousness, it result to positive ends.

Introduction

Violence has several definitions. The *New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language* defines *violence* as follows:

The quality or state of being violent; intensity; fury; also, an instance of violent action. Violent or unjust exercise of power, injury; outrage, desecration; profanation. Physical force unlawfully exercised; an act intending to intimidate or overawe by causing apprehension or bodily injury. The perversion or distortion of the meaning of a text, word or the like; unjustified alteration of wording (1402).

Our treatment of violence in this paper will take cognizance of the first three definitions leaving out the fourth.

Violence is irrational and destructive; it is injurious, unjust and abusive. Those who use violence against their fellow human beings aim at demeaning life, making life uncomfortable for them. The use of violence does not only reduce the quality of life but also makes man aware of the precarious nature of his mortality. Violence happens where there is no equity. From time immemorial, organised societies (states) have had the capacity of putting in place measures and policies that could enhance the rule of law and

thus prevent convulsive occurrences of violence. When a state relegates its primary duty of preserving lives and property, of ensuring a conducive society, the consequence is violence. Where there are class antagonisms, where there is unemployment, primitive accumulation of wealth at the expense of the masses, where there is oppression and bad governance, violent eruptions become the order of the day.

In other words, conflictual situations arise where there is poverty, deprivation, social and economic inequality and extreme violation of human rights. All these injustices increase the potential for violence and terrorism as people begin to rise against these socio-economic factors and political conditions using violence as a means. As Esiaba Irobi has noted:

Terrorism is a legitimate tactic of all down-trodden people seeking to combat oppressive governments. Without terrorism by the I.R.A. would the Republic of Ireland have gained their independence today? Without terrorism by the Mau Mau, would there be Kenya today? Without terrorism by the Irgun and Stern gangs, would there be Israel today? Without terrorism by the Algerians, would the French ever have agreed to have North Africa in 1962? Without terrorism in South Africa, do you think Apartheid would ever be dismantled? (25).

There are also other forms of injustice and discrimination based on gender, religion, colour and age. Oppression of this nature renders these groups powerless and creates potential for violence. Victims of discrimination vary from society to society.

Violence and terrorist acts are ubiquitous in all societies. Violence can be used in a wide and vague manner. It can be a physical act or behaviour that causes damage to both living and inanimate things. Violence is not an abstract concept but a lived reality, particularly political violence which is a consequence of tyranny, megalomania and mis-governance. It is this type of violence that is the focus of this discourse. This type of violence inescapably has a history of action and reaction. Today, we live in a world in which justice and equity is disputed amidst claim and counter claim. This concept is replicated in the three plays under study – *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*, *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Hangmen also Die*.

Violent eruptions have become the order of the day. It is either war in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen or radical Islamists under various names like Al-Qada, ISIS, Boko-Haram, Al-Shabab, and so on visiting violence and terror on their societies or several individuals wielding guns and invading schools, churches, mosques, hotels, market places, killing and maiming innocent citizens. Violence is destructive in nature and human violence unlike animal violence threatens their race. Violence poses a serious danger for man's existence more in the 21st century than it did in the previous centuries. Therefore, dramatising violence can be an imperative as to how we can transform and reform the destructive tendencies of homo-sapiens. There is the utmost need to explore this violent character of human nature through theatre in order to save humanity from itself since theatre is the mother of all arts. That is to say that, the dramaturgy of violence tasks the intellect of its audience to view the tragic moment of our times, to reflect on them and to imagine what a blissful world we would have without violence.

Theatre and Violence

In the **Foreword** to the book, *Theatre and Violence* by Lucy Nevitt (published in 2013), Catherine Cusack notes the following:

The theatre is everywhere, from entertainment districts to the fringes, from the ritual of government to the ceremony of courtroom, from the spectacle of the sporting arena to the theatres of war. Across these many forms stretches a theatrical continuum through which cultures both assert and question themselves.

The dramaturgy of violence asserts and questions the world, indeed humanity in so many dimensions. The dramatisation of violence on stage allows the spectators to engage emotionally with the experiences of both victims of violence and those responsible for the violation of their rights. This narrative approach is done through powerful usage of language, images, metaphors and spectacle, images of preys, hunters and predators, the powerful and the weak, in a word, the oppressors who are the initiators of violence and terror and the *chosified* masses who are the recipients of violent products. The dramatisation of violence does not only jolt the audience into critical thinking along the Brechtian line but also raises ethical and moral questions concerning human nature and action. Thus, questions like who are the perpetrators of violence? What are their motives? Why do they act the way they do? And what are the implications of their action? are raised.

When playwrights present acts of violence in their plays, it is not that they want to valorise violence for its own sake, neither do they enjoy acts of violence, they do so to seek to contribute to making a more peaceful and less violent world. They do so to stimulate the spectators to critically examine the causes of violence as they emotionally and psychologically experience it on stage. Violence used with moral consciousness can lead to positive ends and if art as Aristotle has argued in the *Poetics* is an imitation of life, then art must capture, violence which is part of everyday life in order to purify the action being mimicked. Therefore, violence can empower the audience positively, particularly if it is used within the Brechtian/Boalian meta-theatricality ambience.

Anne Bogart argues that art is violence, “Violence used with moral consciousness and care is a powerful artistic tool that can be used for positive ends” (9). Masters of drama like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Shakespeare used violence to make dramatic statements not necessarily corresponding to the predominating philosophy of their times but drawing attention to the scavenging and predatory nature of human behaviour. Aristophanes in *Lysistrata* drew attention of the Greek populace to the destabilising effects of war, the Peloponnesian wars between Greek City States and Persia. He drew their attention to the necessity of peace where meaningful progress and development could be achieved.

Even though the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides did not display actual violence on stage, acts of violence were reported verbally to the spectators. Such incidences include the plucking of eyes, by Oedipus and the suicide of Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex*. Similarly, the death of Antigone, Haemon her fiancé and the suicide by Eurydice in

Antigone are all reported just like the bizarre violence in *The Oresteia* is not displayed by Aeschylus but reported by the chorus and Orestes himself. These unique instances of dramatised violence in Greek tragedy are not concerned with the sensational acts of murder and suicide per se but the truth that belies the act, the fundamental question of Greek justice based on retributive justice. The question then arises; within the modern context, are these murders and suicidal acts justifiable? Should modern society continue to dwell on jungle justice, this opaque sense of retribution? This to me becomes the *raison d'être* which Greek tragic violence has come to mean.

Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy on the other hand, beginning with *The Spanish Tragedy*, a revenge play, wallowed in wanton and bizarre display of violence on stage. Violence in the plays of Shakespeare takes several forms and serves a variety of purposes. There are duels or sword fights, sacrificial killings and suicides, self-inflicted injuries, sexual violence and comic violence (101-21). These violent incidences do not only reflect the attitudes of the Elizabethan period but more importantly is the significance of the reactions. That is to say that Shakespeare equated violent actions to cosmic disorder and tyrannical tendencies of the aristocracy which may not have conformed with his vision as a playwright.

For instance, the duels, the senseless wars for the acquisition of more territories, the power conflicts and palace coups and murders may not have conformed with his own view of society yet they were expressive images of violence prevalent in the Elizabethan times. Therefore, Shakespeare had to present these macabre and bizarre violent actions by perfidious characters in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* among other plays. While the duels were an expression of the Jacobean and Elizabethan concept of law and justice, the wars and murders represented the greed, avarice and power arrogance of the aristocratic class.

From the foregoing, we have seen that violence has always been a part of art. As Bogart has noted, violence is a part of life's ergo and therefore, "it must be part of art as art is almost always a response to life" (9). Aristotle, the father of art, traces the origin of art from mimesis. However, for this mimicry to be meaningful, it must purify and heighten this life through the cathartic experience. That is to say that, violence in art must emphasise the moral and ethical dialectic which is immanent in the plays under study and it is along these lines that we will now turn our search light to the three plays under evaluation.

The Nature of Violence in African Drama

The nature and character of violent eruptions in African dramaturgy is displayed and enacted on the backdrop of colonialism or bad governance under the vice-grip of our kith and kin. If one were to do taxonomy of modern African drama, most of it would fall under political and social plays that lament rather than celebrate the gains of independence. That is to say that these plays either dramatise the travails of African nations under colonial demagoguery or bewail the lack of progress that flag independence has brought to African nations. Our focus here however, is on Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Mugo Micere's *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*, Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* and Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen also Die*.

In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Wa Thiongo and Micere celebrate the hero of the main struggle Dedan Kimathi who led the revolution of the masses to liberate his country Kenya from British imperialism. Betrayed by his own people and captured by the British, Kimathi refuses to plead guilty and is therefore sentenced to death by hanging. However, at this momentous occasion, the Boy and Girl who have been properly mentored and reconciled by Woman are adequately conscientised to carry on the revolution by shouting in the court “Not dead” (84). The stage directions tell us that, “*The girl shakes her fists at guards*” and there is:

*Utter commotion as struggle between opposing forces ensues. A loud shot is heard. Sudden darkness falls, but only for a moment: for soon, the stage gives way to a mighty crowd of workers and peasants at the centre of which are **Boy and Girl**, singing a thunderous freedom song. All the soldiers are gone, except for the first soldier who shyly joins in the singing from behind (84).*

This Brechtian theatrical device is a sign of the non-terminality of the revolutionary struggle as Boy and Girl now takes over the leadership of the struggle, ably supported by the masses, including even First Soldier, a symbol of the oppressive arm of imperialism and state.

The next question to be asked is what has occasioned the revolution? The revolution or the struggle has become necessary because of the violence and injustice visited on the Kenyan masses by the British forces of occupation. By this, the British have made slavery out of Kenyan masses. Therefore, Kimathi and other braves take it upon themselves to unchain their kith and kin, as a consequence, violence is unleashed on both sides – the colonisers and natives alike. The opening scene in the courtroom highlights the tension and class distinction where “*Africans squeeze around one side seated on rough benches*”; while “*whites occupy more comfortable seats in the opposite side* (3). Thereafter, the audience is plunged into a violent scenario of chilling screams of an oppressed Kenyan being lashed with horse whips. This leads to the enactment of black man’s history of slavery and exploitation by both Black Chiefs and White Colonisers, a situation fraught with violence in a most vicious manner highlighting man’s inhumanity to his fellow man. When they revolt and take concrete steps to fight back they are called terrorists.

The first movement of the play captures this orgy of violence visited on the peasants. For the colonisers, this is captured by the settler, called, Mr. Windhoek:

Settler: I had cattle and sheep by the thousands:
Where are they now?
I had acres of maize and wheat:
Where are they now?
I had a wife and daughter:
Where are they now?
Killed. Burnt. maimed
By this lunatic and his pack of bandits (28).

The loss of Mr. Windhoek extends to all other settlers, for whom the struggle has made it almost impossible to operate their businesses and farms, including security of their lives.

For Kimathi, it is more of physical violence. He has been slapped several times by Henderson. “*Now really mad Shaw Henderson strikes him again and again, using hands, legs, gun and swearing as he strikes*” (55). Again, Kimathi comes out of the torture chamber bloodied several times. The stage directions tell us that:

Kimathi, *blood stained, shirt torn, emerges from the torture chamber kicked, pushed from behind. He can hardly work. He falls on his hands and feet.*
Henderson, Waitinia and Gatotia and the two soldiers follow, holding some of the instruments of torture. They stand in a group except the human soldier who stands apart, slightly hiding his face in shame. **Kimathi** is obviously broken in body.... *BUT not in spirit* (57).

It is important to note that violence in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is on two levels-physical and emotional. The physical would be taken to be the loss of assets and property experienced more by the white settlers, who have access to financial institutions they can borrow from to build their homes, establish farms, own cattle and ranches and indulge in other business ventures. The native Africans on the other hand have little to lose along these lines as they are mainly squatters on lands bought by the white colonialists or simple subsistence farmers. However, they underwent serious physical torture in the hands of the whites who colonised them and could easily throw them into prison under trumped-up charges.

The emotional or traumatic stress that the protagonist experience as a consequence of violence is shared by the audience through the cathartic process. Here, the audience is able to empathise with both Kimathi who suffers unjustly but stubbornly and nobly carries on believing in the rationality and justification of his cause and action on the one hand and on the other by the settler, even though in a lesser measure, for being caught between two powerful forces in the struggle for supremacy. In these circumstances, moral and ethical issues are raised in the minds of the spectators. For instance, is Kimathi right in taking up arms against imperialist forces? Should he plead guilty and then abandon the cause for which many have sacrificed their lives just to save his neck? Should he continue to resist until freedom is won and Kenya gain her independence? Again, the audience would have to rationalise whether Mr. Windhoek is right in his racist outburst and irascible behaviour.

To Kimathi and his fellow co-travellers, he is being provoked to violence by the oppressive and slavery nature of colonialism. Therefore, he must fight to liberate his people as he tells the judge.

Kimathi: The jungle of colonialism? Of exploitation for it is there that you'll find creatures of prey feeding on the blood and bodies of those who toil: those who make the earth yield.
Those who make factories roar

Those who want and groan for a better day
Tomorrow
The maimed
Their backs bent
Sweat dropping down their shoulders
Beaten
Starved
Despised
Spat on
Whipped
But refusing to be broken
Waiting for a new dawn
Dawn on Mount Kenya (26).

This precisely is the heart of the matter. Kimathi presents to Judge Henderson in no uncertain terms the existential material condition under which the masses of Kenya languish in the throes of colonialism. A system whose laws protect the oppression and license the murderers of his people, such a law is anathema to him and he would never plead guilty for taking up arms to dismantle such an unjust system.

For Shaw Henderson, so long as Kimathi and the likes of Stanley Mathenge Matenjagwo, Kimemia, Ole Kiso, Njama and the remaining terrorists are not captured nor made to surrender and plead guilty, violence and physical abuse or the torture of Kimathi would continue. To do this is Bwana Waitina who gleefully and with tremendous appetite furiously whips Kimathi with the aim of breaking his resolve. Unfortunately and to their disappointment, Kimathi becomes more hardened and defiant.

Shaw Henderson's arguments and actions are based on the dictum that, 'might is right'. He tells Kimathi: "Nations live by strength and self-interest. You challenged our interests: we had to defend them. It is to our mutual interest that we end this ugly war (34). To this, Kimathi responds:

Kimathi: ... This is a new war. We bled for you. We have fought your wars for you, against the Germans, Japanese, Italians. This time we shall bleed for our soil, for our freedom, until you let go.

Henderson: You are dreaming again.

Kimathi: Yes. And I will keep on dreaming till my visions come true and our people are free (34-35).

Frustrated that Kimathi does not cave in, Henderson resorts to flattery; but Kimathi again refuses to betray his people. The arguments and counter arguments here lead to actions and reactions as each person tries to justify his position. As noted earlier, in a conflictual situation that leads to violence, each party tries to justify its position. Here, Henderson is justifying why the colonialist have to use violence to maintain law and order while Kimathi too justifies the use of violence as a necessary tool for revolution.

In *Once upon Four Robbers*, we are confronted with a different case of violence – armed robbery. At the end of the civil war in Nigeria in 1970, there was a proliferation of arms in the country and in the mid-70s, armed robbers terrorised Nigerians particularly in big cities like Lagos, Port-Harcourt, Benin, Enugu and Kaduna. To curtail their menace, the military regime under General Gowon promulgated the Armed Robbery and Firearms Decree 47 of 1970. With this decree armed robbers were publicly executed. Osofisan wrote the play as part of his own contribution to the debate about the execution of armed robbers in Nigeria. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan has not only shown societal dynamics and contradictions that give rise to armed robbery but has also asked his spectators the pertinent question: would the execution of armed robbers at the Bar Beach stop armed robbery? This is the heart of the matter, the moral ethic that underscores this play.

Once Upon Four Robbers plunges the audiences' sight and psyche into an orgy of violence. The stage directions provide a vivid account of the violence.

Soldiers lead in a prisoner and tie him to the stake. Then, at the orders of the officer, they take position. They fire. The prisoner slumps. A doctor steps forward to examine the body. The **Soldiers** untie the corpse and carry it out (21).

Left to mourn their late colleague and lament their fate are Alhaja, Major, Hassan and Angola. They claim that their leader has been slaughtered gruesomely like a “Ramadan lamb”. (22). Now the closely knit crime family is scattered like sheep without a shepherd as noted by Major.

Major: The party is over and its going to be every man for himself from now on (23).

However, it is worthy to note that without collaboration without collective effort, the desire to simply rob or initiate change would not be possible. This is because a revolution is brought about through collective effort and not by a single individual. This is why Major's effort to go it alone to double-cross his colleagues leads to his tragic end.

The most important thematic preoccupation of the play, to me, is why the robbers should embark on this dangerous mission knowing well that sooner or later, the law would catch-up with them. Major acknowledges this truth.

Major: Face the truth man! Ever since this new decree of armed robbery, we've been finished! You can only walk that far on the edge of the blade. Sooner or later; the blade cuts in (23).

But it is far from over because the four robbers “got a wound to avenge”. The first target that would provide a balm to their wound is the Sergeant, who gave the order for the execution of their leader. The second are a group of citizens who must be made to account for their ill-gotten wealth and also, the poverty of their workers. These are essentially the pen-robbers and those whom Angola says “ride their cars along the sore-

ridden backs of the poor” (36). Unfortunately, these are not the victims of the four armed robbers whom Aafa gives the power to rob.

The second instance of violence occurs when Major tries to double-cross his fellow robbers. The pleadings and counter arguments of his co-robbers would not change his treacherous course. As far as he is concerned, he is out of the filth and into a new life. As he says:

Major: No more scurrying in the smell of back streets. A house the size of a palace! The law, tamed with my bank account! And children. Listen, I am going to be a daddy! I will own the main streets, six, no... ten super market (52).

Just as he thinks he is out of the woods and would no longer rob, the soldiers strike. The sub-text provides the missing link in the following:

He begins to back away from them, still having them covered with the gun. Suddenly, the noise of gunshots from his rear. He wheels round, only to crumble as he is hit (53).

As this instance, the soldiers overwhelm the robbers as the other three of them escape, without a penny, while Major remains on the ground wounded. His greed and avarice has led him to finally lose both his life and the money.

Major’s action raises the issue of materialism in most African states. He wants to be rich to be a master to enable him buy justice, manipulate the law enforcement agencies and purchase chieftaincy titles. He is not alone in this line of thought as even the soldiers represented by the sergeant and the market women are all motivated by the profit motif. This extends to the civil servants and government contractors. The only difference between them and the armed robbers is that they do not rob with arms. The issue of robbery generally throws up a moral and ethical question. Are the authorities right in publicly executing armed robbers who steal mere thousands and let go civil-servants pen-robbers who collide with politicians to steal billions? Would such a situation not negate the true spirit of justice and encourage people with evil minds to indulge in armed robbery, targeted at the rich class in our society who are responsible as it were, for their alienation, joblessness and poverty?

These are the moral issues that the play raises and this is what is responsible for the violence that we encounter in the play. In other words, the trauma that the robbers undergo, the anger and bitterness in them which is not essentially of their own making but that which arises out of ineptitude and lack of pragmatic leadership by the political elite makes them to take up arms in revenge against a society that they believe dehumanises them. This form of social injustice corrodes moral values and gives vent to uncontrolled pent up anger and violence. These may be some of the considerations and equivocations that may make the audience of *Once Upon Four Robbers* argue against their execution in some productions of the play. This happens because of the

unconventional nature of the ending of the play typical of some African folktales. At the end of the play, there is a stalemate as Aafa walks out of the audience to state as follows:

Aafa: A stalemate? How can I end my story on a stalemate: if we sit on the fence, life is bound to pass us by on both sides. No, I need your help. One side is bound to win in the end. The robbers, or the soldiers who are acting on your behalf. So you've got to decide and resolve the issue. Which shall it be? Who wins? Yes madam? Your reasons please? And you gentleman? Should the robbers be shot? Please do not be afraid to voice your opinion, we want this play to end. Okay, I'll ask five opinions and then we'll let the majority carry the day.... Yes? (77).

Thereafter, views are collated, however if the audience exonerates the four robbers, they are declared winners and they go on to rob the dancers but in the event that the house decides for the soldiers, the armed robbers are executed.

The violence experienced in Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* is akin to that in *Once upon Four Robbers*. In both plays, societal dynamics and contradictions are responsible for the eruption of violence. In *Hangmen Also Die*, violence is occasioned on four levels, the assassination of Dr. Ogbansiegebe, dispossession and robbing violently by the suicide squad, the interruption of Chief Erekosima's coronation ceremony and his subsequent hanging; and finally, the hanging of members of the suicide squad.

Members of the suicide squad like the four robbers have a serious grudge against society. Let us hear their manifold agonies:

R.I.P.: We have no jobs

Acid: Therefore we have no money.

Dayan: Which means we cannot marry.

R.I.P.: And consequently cannot have children.

Chorus: We are the rejects of the world.

R.I.P.: (*Violently.*) So, if today, we have turned to violence as the only weapon to redeem our destiny redeem our fate, our future and our manhood. It is because...

(They charge into the audience, up the aisles, daggers in their hands.)

Dayan: We have no place in the politics of this nation.

Acid: The Constituent Assembly is filled with the faces of the same ancient Chimpanzees.

R.I.P.: It is because we have no chance in shaping the destiny of this nation.

Acid: We are like tigers in a game reserve.

R.I.P.: It is because.....

Dayan: We have no place in history. No solid earth beneath our feet

Acid: Our hands are tied behind our backs.

R.I.P.: It is because...

Dayan: We are not even given a chance to contribute our own quarter.

Chorus: We have been marginalised out of existence.

R.I.P.: So here, we are.... (31-32)

It is therefore manifest that society is responsible for the manufacture of these miscreants who as it were, are taking their pound of flesh on society. Therefore, when society and in particular, those who are in position of authority fail to deliver, when they become selfish and limited in vision and all welfare measures are denied the underprivileged, violence becomes a veritable vehicle of ventilating their anger and disgust. This is the case with these seven characters in the play, well trained graduates who are now destitute. Given the fact that they have no means of good living in spite of their education, they maim, kill and rob violently. As they have all noted:

All: We do what we do because we know we have no future, because we know no matter what we do, no matter how we aspire, there is something in the atmosphere to destroy us... (38).

In a situation like this, they become suspicious of everybody around them, including their mentor and lecturer Dr. Ogbasiengbe who initiated them into terrorism and justified it so long as “the terrorist hath sheathed his knife and washed blood off his hands”. (26)

As young men, Dr. Ogbasiengbe colonised their minds and radicalised them to become his henchmen and assassins, visiting terror on his political adversaries. Consequently, when they became aware that he was using them, they in “good conscience” hanged him and made it look as if he (Ogbasiengbe) committed suicide. Thereafter, the squad become more hardened and addicted to crime. They took to crime as if it is an opium and therefore, had no conscience whatsoever about the wrong they are inflicting on society. They take pleasure in crime and valourise their dexterity and invincibility.

The third violent action in *Hangmen Also Die* is at the instance of Tamara, who challenges and harangues the squad to interrupt Chief Erekosima’s coronation ceremony” (64).

Tamara: ... If you call yourselves men, if what dangles between your thighs is a symbol of manhood, then prove this on right now, prove to me that you are men?

R.I.P.: Are you challenging us.

Tamara: I am challenging you. All of you. Prove to me you are the suicide squad... here is a battle. A battle of the dispossessed versus the self-pressured. Between the haves and the have nots. Between the landless and the landlords. Prove your mettle, prove to me you are the warriors you claim to be. Prove to me that you are not eunuchs? Power prostitutes? Destitutes? Cowards? Bullies? Empty Barrels? (*desperately now*) young men, remember your seventy year – Old grandmother who still farms before she eats, remember also your poverty-stricken people,

remember too your petroleum which is being pumped out daily from your veins and then FIGHT FOR YOUR FREEDOM (64-65).

Tamara, like Woman in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, plays the role of a true mother, mentor and conscientiser, mentoring her children to be focused and be more responsible. She deconstructs the ideologically barren squad to pitch tent with the oppressed, “the wretched of the earth”. To some, the use of violence to interrupt the vulgar display of ill-gotten wealth by the Chief here is positive as it draws the attention of the audience to the nefarious acts of Chief Erekosima in defrauding people of three million naira oil-spillage compensation money for the despoliation of their fish ponds and farm lands. Yet for others, the act of murder for whatever reason remains condemnable as it is not only extra-judicial but also morally wrong.

The fourth instance of violence happens belatedly in the yard of a Nigerian Prison. Although Yekini, the prison’s hangman, refuses to hang seven members of the squad because he believes in the rightness of their action whose act was done to right a wrong. Nevertheless, the squad of seven are eventually hanged at the end of the play. Again, the audience would have to decide as to the rightness of this horrendous act of justice and would within themselves wonder whether the squad should have been given a life sentence or their case, dismissed in view of the glaring facts before them. Therefore, as Jordan Wash has noted:

An act of violence enacted on stage and viewed by an audience can act as a catalyst for the coming together of that audience in defence of humanity, a togetherness in the act of defying the truth mimicked by the theatrical violence represented on stage, which has the potential to stir the theatre communion (212).

Conclusion

We have examined the nature and character of violence in selected plays of Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Micere Mugo, Femi Osofisan and Esiaba Irobi and have argued that violence enacted on stage creates a lasting impact on the psyche of the audience raising moral and ethical questions in their minds. The dramatisation of violence also allows the audience to engage more emotionally with both victims of violent acts and those who perpetuate violence. This further provides insight to the destructive nature of human beings. We also argued that it is the oppressors, the ruling and power elite that are responsible for the creation of violence. For instance, while it is the tyranny and oppressive nature of colonialism that creates violence in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, it is equally the neglect of society, injustice and joblessness and lack of care for the disadvantaged classes that is responsible for the violence in *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Hangmen Also Die*. Therefore, in dramatising these acts of violence on stage, playwrights are drawing the attention of their audience to the skewed nature of society and urging them to seek ways of controlling them before they burst into violent acts.

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