

Representation of children and childhood in East African drama: Critical analysis of *The Burning of Rags* and *The Burdens*

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Abstract: This paper has critically analysed the representation of children and childhood in selected East African plays-Francis Imbuga's *The Burning of Rags* and John Ruganda's *The Burdens*. Semiotics Literary theory, which is the production and interpretation of meaning has been used. This research adopted descriptive and qualitative approaches based on textual analysis. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the two writers and the two plays. The study was based on textual analysis and library research. Comprehensive literature review was carried out and the collected information synthesised in relation to a critical reading of the selected texts. The study utilised both primary and secondary data. Primary data consisted of the selected sample plays. The Study promotes the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Global Goals) aimed at ensuring peace and prosperity. It also instigates stakeholders to act on realising Vision 2030 economic, social and political pillars. Students and scholars of Literature will also benefit from the findings of the study particularly on approaches to reading East African drama and matters representation of children and childhood in Literature. The study concluded that the child becomes the catalyst in revealing the generation gap differences and the consequences of the same; and is part and parcel of the tribulations in society. Children understand societal problems, particularly socio-economic, and are affected by them.

Keywords: Childhood, Children, Drama, Literature, Play, Representation

1. Introduction

Notions of childhood are not new in Literature. However, what is new is the concern on the theme of Childhood in Literature and the aesthetic representation of Children and Childhood, which actually has gradually evolved (Cunningham, 1995). Literature clearly depicts this evolution. For example, in English Literature, the theme of Childhood has been a central one. Indeed children play a significant role in a great number of Elizabethan lyrics and the 19th Century European fiction. Dickens for example, used children to show his perspective of society. Many of his novels such as *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and many others use children as the central protagonists. In the Caribbean region, Childhood took a centre stage in the works of major writers such as V. S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, and George Lamming, among others. As Oyoo (2004) observes, childhood in Caribbean Literature took a symbolic role.

The above writers wrote Childhood novels in which the growth of the child, the child's widening perception of the physical and social environment, was juxtaposed with the socio-political and economic growth of the child's notion and immediate environment. From the 20th century onwards, childhood has taken a significant position in Literature. In African societies childhood was perceived differently-particularly in traditional African communities. The child was mainly viewed as naïve, innocent and uncritical; delicate and helpless who needed the protection of the adults. With the emergence of written African literature, African writers started to incorporate children in their world of fiction.

It thus becomes imperative for us to study the presentation of childhood in African literature. This study therefore aimed at analysing the representation of Children and Childhood in selected plays by East African playwrights-Francis Imbuga and John Ruganda.

2. Literature review

Under this section, the study has reviewed secondary sources on representation of Children and Childhood in Literature.

2.1 The Aspect of Children and Childhood in Literature

Scholarly works on the theme of Children and Childhood in Literature have evolved from the 18th Century. In 1960, Phillippe Aries sparked a controversial debate on the idea of Childhood when he claimed that Childhood as an idea did not exist before the early modern period. As Cunningham (1995) observes, Aries' hypothesis raised a lot of debate and inspired scholarly works on the idea of Childhood. Childhood was viewed as an age of magic and fascination that prepared children to face active life as adults. Tucker (1981) refers to the ideas of the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, on the nature of Childhood particularly when it comes to response to Literature. He underlines the main psychological differences that the child has in the manner in which it responds to Literature. Quoting Piaget, he says that the child views the world differently from adults. The child's point of view consists of innocence and the world view is highly optimistic.

In Piaget's view, more children think in a qualitative way than adults. This explains their short concentration span. He also posits the argument that children up to the age of seven tend to think in a more concrete manner than they do later. He emphasizes what he calls the child's schematic view of the world; the child's belief that the world is harmonious with everything falling in place according to sound moral law. Emilie (1972) focuses on the theme of Childhood as it appears in Literature through different ages. She observes that while Child as a theme and symbol has appeared in Literature and Art of all ages, a parallel between the general regard for childhood and its literary and artistic importance was apparent for centuries (Emilie, 1972: 6). She goes on to note that before Rousseau and later the Romantics, interest in the child was limited. Child characters appearing in the earlier literature conveyed the lack of importance they held in actual life and in books they emerged as little more than symbolic figures (Emilie 1972: 17).

The appearance of the child as an important theme in English Literature coincided with the change in sensibility and thought which came in the nineteenth century. In Emilie's study on Childhood in Spanish Literature, she argues how different writers explore the theme of Childhood and characterize the child. She notes for example, that Ana Maria Matute, Spanish writer, does not offer any set solution to the problems of the pains of childhood and of growing up. Rather, through her extensive use of the theme, she affirms consequences are heavily felt in later years (Emilie 1972: 164). She concludes: "Childhood is important for the understanding of the adult as many of characters look back to childhood as a way to explain their present" (Emilie, 1972: 164). Emilie's focus on the works by Matute gives us a lot of insight into the study of childhood in Literature.

In Africa, children were considered as delicate human beings, highly valued and had to be protected by adults. This traditional view of children is outlined in many anthropological works (Mbiti, 1969). It is interesting, however, to note that the patriarchal view and stereotypes of children are clearly dramatized in early African novels. For instance, in the early works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe, children are put at the periphery of the plot; only mentioned or patronized by the adults. From the above works of literature, it is clear that there is very little critical approach to the theme of Children and Childhood in African Literature and more so in African drama. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this lacuna by focusing on the theme of Childhood in East African drama, with a limitation to two plays written by the two East African playwrights.

3. Research methodology

This research, which was based on textual analysis, adopted the descriptive and qualitative approaches. The text was critically read and aspects of characterization identified. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the two writers and the two plays, namely; *The Burdens* by John Ruganda and *The Burning of Rags* by Francis Imbuga. These are some of the major playwrights in East Africa. The books selected are also the major plays in the region. These texts were further selected based on the objectives and the premises of the study. The study was based on textual analysis and library research. Comprehensive literature review was carried out and the collected information synthesized in relation to a critical reading of the selected texts. The study utilized both primary and secondary data. Primary data consisted of the two selected sample plays. The secondary data supplemented and supported the critical analysis of the primary texts. Secondary data was collected from Mount Kenya and Maseno universities libraries.

Sources from the internet were also used to argument both the secondary and primary data. The analysis, which was both thematic and stylistic, focused on the representation of the theme of childhood in the texts and specifically the images given to the child characters in relation to the writers' vision.

4. Analysis of Representation of Children and Childhood in the Plays

4.1. Views of John Ruganda's *The Burdens*

The Burdens deals with the economic plight of Wamala's family; a family of once a Cabinet Minister who turned against the government he was serving. The play presents the domestic tension between Wamala and his wife, Tinka. Right from the beginning of the play, it is clear that Wamala's family is not happy. Having started off as a humble teacher, Wamala rises to become a principal of a teacher-training college before he finally joins politics and becomes the Minister of Works in the ruling regime of a post-independence African state. Wamala's greed and ambition, however, ruins his career when he and others try to overthrow the very government in which he is a minister. He is captured and imprisoned. After serving the prison term, Wamala and his family are settled in a city slum where they lead a life of obscurity and abject poverty making them behave in a rather absurd manner. However, he is a sensitive father as he buys his son, Kaija a bed.

When the action begins in *Act One*, Kaija is introduced as yawning. Though this is a sign of hunger, Kaija wants to hide it. The mother is surprised to see him, of course, when he is supposed to be in bed. Kaija reveals the poor living conditions in the house. He has to share a bed with his younger sister, Nyakake. Kaija is fourteen years old. Like any teenage child, Kaija has wishes "I wish I had a bed of my own like all the boys at school" (2). He even wishes he had a "reed bed" (3). Kaija is portrayed as a highly sensitive and inquisitive child. He asks the mother for food and later reveals a lot about his perspective of their environment.

The slum life is difficult. Kaija is worried that the *kondos* (thieves) may steal his father's regalia, which he has noticed that the father highly regards. Kaija asks the mother on her alleged subversion of her husband's efforts at making a social and political comeback:

Kaija: *Is it true you dragged him down? That you never helped him? That you drove away his friends and relatives and that, that's why there was nobody to help him when the soldiers came? Is it true you were always dragging him down?* (5).

These questions indicate the child's understanding of his present situation. He listens to the accusations between the parents and he is concerned.

Tinka denies all but Kaija goes on:

Kaija: *That you kept bringing him down and down. A millstone round his neck, he says, a big burden* (6).

Tinka's answer to Kaija's questions reveals her overt hypocrisy and ill intentions of influencing the son against the father.

Tinka: *He has never been up, Kaija, I want you to know that never been really up. As high as men like Isaza, or Isimbwa. A lamb is not a lion, son* (4).

Tinka's denial is an attempt to undermine the husband and also influence the son against his father. However, Kaija is sensitive and clearly reads the mother's intentions. The teenager Kaija understands how the relationship between the parents has changed. He is also much aware of the accusations between the two. Kaija is concerned about the sister's, Nyakake, coughing. He tells the mother that his teacher suspects Nyakake might be suffering from T.B (5).

Tinka reacts:

It wouldn't be so bad ... if only we could take her to a proper doctor. But your father prefers his bottle. (Silence) One day he will find three dead bodies in here if he goes on like this. (4-5).

Tinka's prophecy on death is ironical and foreshadows the end of the play. Even though uses this to alienate Wamala from the children, the playwright artistically shows how the oversensitive Kaija is affected by this. Later in *Act Three* he dreams of the flood of blood which later turns out to be the murder of the father by Tinka.

Kaija is sensitive and critical. The fear of the *kondos* (thieves) makes him wish that the father was there. As a child he understands the protective role of the father. In many patriarchal African societies, fathers were expected to protect their families. The child's conception of protection is shown in line with patriarchal requirements.

However, Tinka wants the son to know that she is the one playing a husband's role in the patriarchal society. She even insinuates that Kaija has no father. "A boy with a father should have a bed of his own," she says. Kaija is also sympathetic to the mother. When Tinka claims that she is growing old, Kaija differs with her:

... you're not growing old, mother,

No grey hairs on your head.

No deep wrinkles on your face either. Bone structure firm (11-12).

Kaija understands the suffering that the mother undergoes. His conception of old age is basically childlike. He even wants to go and sell groundnuts like the other boys in the slum and help the mother. But Tinka's pride will not allow her to let Kaija sell groundnuts so as to raise money to buy himself a bed. It is, however, ironical that as Tinka cunningly tries to alienate Wamala from the son and make Kaija view the father as irresponsible and not loving, Wamala enters the house with a second hand safari bed he has bought for the son. This is immediately after Tinka's story of Ngoma's beautiful daughter who married a Creeper. The leper symbolizes Wamala.

Kaija agrees with the father on how Tinka has been stringing lies together (18) against the father. It is ironical that when Wamala insists that Kaija has to see his bed, Tinka claims that it is late, 1:00 a.m, yet she was busy telling the son stories against the father. When Kaija comes from the bedroom to take the bed she orders him away (20). The playwright's use of the phrase "she sweeps Kaija off the room and closes the door" (p. 20) is meant to reveal the dark side of Tinka, her cunning and hypocritical nature not to appreciate anything good done by Wamala. She even goes on to claim, "we are fed up with second hand things." After the scuffle over Tinka's *enguli* and on noticing that Tinka's elbow is hurt, Wamala is apologetic and even counsels Tinka on the expectations of a man in his situation. Kaija comes in and notices his mother's bandaged hand. He pleads with the father "Don't do it again father ... you don't know how much it hurts" (36).

Though a teenager, Kaija has feelings. He sympathizes with the mother. The constant feuding between Wamala and Tinka has divided Kaija's loyalty between the two. Though he is very much attached to his mother who, he has noticed, is not happy as she used to be, he is also quite close to the father. They, for instance, discuss Tinka in her absence. The playwright introduces the technique of play-within a play to show Tinka's contempt of Wamala. When she acts as Kanagonago she destroys any hope that Wamala might have had for respectability and a possible political comeback. She pictures Wamala as being beyond salvation.

Kaija is put in the midst of the dramatic action in this play so as to reveal the theme of Childhood. He is portrayed as critical and sensitive. He is affected by the parents' constant feuding. In *Act Three* of the play he reveals his

revolutionary nature. He can no longer watch as the father mistreats the mother. He tells the mother, "you know mother, I don't like him hitting you like that" (67). He is ready to fight for the mother: "If he goes on hitting you, one day he'll have to settle it with me (emphatically). One day he will" (68).

Kaija blames the parents for showing their dirty linen in the public. He fears that his friends and school mates will hate him. The playwright has used Kaija's dream on floods of blood to reveal the child's emotions. The wrangles between the parents make Kaija to dream about blood. This foreshadows the murder in the play. In *Act Three* the playwright brings into action the innocent and young Nyakake. Like Kaija she is also sensitive. She reveals her innocence when she asks the mother, "Mama was it all right my telling Papa? ... that you told us he was with friends ... Our other Mama's (71).

Nyakake also reveals an attachment to the father. The two children are not aware that Tinka has murdered Wamala, though Kaija notices her stained clothes and is inquisitive over it. Nyakake insists that she is not going anywhere till the father returns home. Her childlike attachment to the father is revealed. "I won't go anywhere before papa returns (78) she says. She innocently asks "why didn't he say goodbye to me?" (98). Tinka is at pains to explain to the children that their father went for a burial and will return soon. However with the children's insistence she starts getting remorseful as her actions dawn on her, and also the fact that the children will have to live alone.

She tells them, "and when you grow up, remember I said I was sorry. I couldn't take it much longer" (80). Her justification of the murder of the husband is not convincing. We know she contributed to the escalation of the tension in the family. The children are aware of this. Nyakake keeps on asking for the father "Oh papa, where is papa? Papa, papa". (80). The repetition of "papa" reveals Nyakake's feelings and understanding that the father may not return home. It is like a child's innocent lament and cry. At the end of the play Tinka is arrested and the children have to be taken to an orphanage. The children thus become victims of societal and human nature. The inability of their parents to reconcile with their new situation leaves the two children powerless and victims of a material society that has polluted human nature.

The two children's sensitive, innocent and critical comments and observations reveal their understanding of human nature and societal nature. Though Tinka's last words are "and always remember, it was not my fault" (81), we cannot exonerate her from the tragic ending of the action in the play.

4.2. Views of Francis Imbuga's *The Burning of Rags*

The stage directions in *Act 1 Scene I* of *Burning of Rags* introduce the conflict technically through drumming "two drums express conflict with each other" (1). The apparition of Matilda enters and expresses the suspicion among human beings in a more cynical manner. "There every member of the audience comes to the theatre with a knife. And they use the knives to cut each other open before the actual play opens" (1). The metaphor of "cutting" is used to reinforce the suspicion among human beings. They only settle in theatre after confirming that they are safe.

She also reveals the mechanical relationships and pretence among human beings. But once in a while they come in totally united like when something really terrible has happened, a plane crash or the death of an important thief. It is satirical that the people unite when 'an important thief dies' or there is a national catastrophe. Her past scares everybody. Yona, the dream vision of young boy screams and Matilda says 'Yona am still searching'. By use of narrator/ audience technique she tells the audience 'that is where I have come from...from then on, I shall no longer bear the responsibility alone' (2).

From this we learn that she is in search of a person who bears the responsibility for Yona. She has been vilified but she is in search of the truth. Yona refers to her as mama. She remarks that the people in the society prefer referring to her in past tense, and reveals that she is married to 'a son of this home' (2). Her tying of the

rope on one of the legs of Agala's bed signifies the ties she has had with Agala. The half-naked boy is also pulled in to signify a family unit. The boy seems to be bleeding from recent circumcision.

We learn that Yona is Agala's grandchild (3). Matilda accuses Agala of wearing a solid mask and being a liar. That it is Agala took dowry to her home when she married his son, Denis. Agala denounces Denis as not worthy his son. He reveals that Denis moved to the city. Agala's dream is used as a dream motif to reveal the past situation and also create the play's dramatic action. We learn that Matilda committed suicide. The 'unusually large crucifix' tied around Elima's neck communicates her inner torture. From Elima's and Agala's conversation (6) we learn that Agala is undergoing a kind of depression, a psychological problem, and that the doctor has asked him to forget about Denis (his urban son).

The action in *Act One Scene II* introduces Agala's teenage boy, Bandi, memorizing a poem written by his brother Denis. He is proud of his brother. Here the child's lack of prejudices or rigidity is shown. Whereas Agala feels that Denis has let the society down, Bandi's childhood innocence lacks this kind of rigidity that characterizes the adults. The poem echoes Denis' feeling that he is done with Matilda, 'let her go she belonged to the gone' (7) 'let her go she was too old'.

Agala calls Bandi but Bandi goes on reciting the poem till he is struck by Agala. He tells Bandi that Bandi should be different from Denis. The child's innocence is dramatized in Bandi's behaviour; 'Bandi sneaks behind him (Agala), picks the stick, which the old man has dropped down, and takes it into the house' (8). Agala laments over the abject poverty he lives in yet his son is a university professor. He reveals that Denis has bought a house in the city. Agala and Elima exchange words before Bandi. Agala believes that children belong to the man but Elima asserts herself by saying, 'neither had you one when I came' (9). He even blames her for 'poisoning' the children (9).

In this Imbuga reveals Agala as belonging to the old generation of men, being conservative and looking down upon women. However, Elima cannot be intimidated. Agala tells her 'you spoilt Denis, and now you want to do the same to Bandi' (9). Agala can't believe that Denis addresses letters to his mother and not to him. Denis' letter to the parents heightens the conflict between tradition and modernity. He categorically states that he wouldn't be available to perform the traditional rites expected of him if the son is circumcised in the traditional manner. From this we see a dramatization of the inevitable generation conflict that comes about when fathers hold hard and fast to the old ways while sons who go yonder into the city, come home repudiating the ways of their ancestors.

The generation gap difference is reinforced through the register that Agala uses. He refers to Denis as a 'fool' (10). Denis shows his overt rejection of traditional practices by saying; 'Besides, I wish to make it clear that when I feel it necessary that Yona should be circumcised, I shall take him to the hospital' (10). Hospital here is a symbol of modernity. Agala feels that Denis is 'mad' and even swears to curse Denis (raise my finger to the skies) (11). He is shocked that Denis has a female cook. He refers to Denis a big fool (use of oxymoron) and even denounces him as his son. Agala wants to send Yona to invite his fellow elder, Babu, for a drink only for Babu to appear unexpected. The two elders communicate in proverbs (12). Here the child has to obey orders from the adults, act as a messenger and run errands. The conversation between Elima and Babu reveals Elima's reservations on Babu (he belongs to the old conservative generation). The Biblical allusion even satirizes Babu. The allusion to the story of Aineah who was possessed by demons and Jesus healed him is used to point to what the elders view as confusion in Denis.

In *Act One Scene III* the dramatic action shifts to the urban sub-urban of Westlands, Nairobi in Denis' house. The playing of "loud Scottish country music" characterizes Denis as "modern", kind of estranged from his roots. Hilda, Denis' mistress, ".... glides up and down the floor in expert dance response to the music" (19). This stage directions contrast with the earlier two scenes. Denis reprimands Hilda for trying to ape/imitate Scottish music.

He regrets that Africans are aping foreign music and abandoning their cultural music such as “Senganya, Ramogi, Sukuti” or some other truly respectable African dance” (19).

The dialogue between Hilda and Denis is used to satirize Denis’ beliefs and even his relationship with Hilda. Denis pretends to love African culture yet ironically he is running away from the cultural circumcision of his son. He refers to himself as “... a man of my upbringing, a truly impeccable African upbringing” (21). He believes that he shouldn’t knock at his own door. His relationship with Hilda is satirized. The role – play dance mocks Denis’ beliefs. Denis does not even know how to refer to Hilda “civilized wife, woman and girlfriend” (20). He ironically thinks that civilization has polluted Hilda. Hilda thinks that she is “a trusted servant” (20). On page 21 we learn that Denis is a distinguished professor and head of Department of Culture. Denis is ready to leave for the village. He lies to Hilda that there is urgent letter from his father to go and attend to land issue (22). Hilda insists that she wants use the car forcing Denis to change his plans and use a train.

This scene dramatizes the identity crisis in Denis, he is living two lives. Surprisingly he supports African culture but he does not practise it. This makes him a pseudo-intellectual. His relationship with Hilda is also satirized. He refers to Hilda as a synthetic woman and says that he can’t marry such a woman. Ironically he is more synthetic. Hilda reminds him of what he treated her to on their first date; western junk food (24). The scene ends with a black out as Denis orders Hilda to give him the suitcase. In the following scene the action continues in Denis’ house. Denis has left. Hilda admires “a shattered picture frame...” (25). The shattered picture foreshadows the turmoil in her life. Henrics Fisher an African-American friend and colleague of Denis enters the room. We learn that Denis was unable to buy a train ticket to travel to Kisumu. Denis sent Henrics to buy a ticket for him, ironically Denis cannot because of corruption. Henrics easily gets the ticket because of his near white skin (26).

He is surprised that “ten years after independence” blacks still suffer from the psychological colonial problem of worshipping whites. The dialogue between Henrics and Hilda introduces a sub-plot in the play. We learn that the two are former lovers and that they even sired a baby. The secret has been hidden from Denis. Hilda tells Henrics that if Denis discovers ‘...it would hurt him to the marrow’ (28). The sub-plot introduces an innocent child who is mentioned and acts as the link between Hilda and Henrics and also ironically, Denis. We learn that Hilda’s father disowned her because of her relationship with Henrics. Action in *Scene V* moves to Agala’s compound. Elima clothes as she sings a work song. She is in “very high spirits” on page 31; expecting Denis to arrive from the city. Babu reveals: ‘when I heard your voice singing happily above the quarrel of utensils (notice use of personification), I said to myself, that is Elima announcing the arrival of her son to the village’ (31). The conversation between Elima and Babu reveals the society’s aesthetics of a good woman (32) and we learn of the planned circumcision of Yona.

Here the child is caught in between the cultural aesthetics and requirements of a community that brings in collision the traditionalists and modernists. Ironically the first person that Denis talks to on arrival in the village is Orondo, who has just eloped with a beautiful village girl. Elima changes clothes so as to welcome the son in style and Babu refers to women as “chameleons’ (33). Imbuga first introduces Babu and Denis and kind of contrasts them. Babu mentions the coming circumcision of Yona. “...he is the bull that will raise dust on the fresh graves of a great many of us” (33). This wise saying portrays Yona as courageous and with a bright future. The young boy Bandi is used by the adults to run errands.

He is fascinated by his brother’s arrival. Babu, a former Christian has an ambivalent view of Christianity. He refers to Denis as “prodigal son from the city” (35). This is an allusion to the biblical prodigal son and it somehow satirizes Denis. Agala refers to their house as “sooty” making Denis feel emphasized. According to him “...the city has vomited” Denis back to the village (notice the irony in the personification). When Babu says that old men are a bother” Denis retorts that “old people are our gourds of wisdom” (36). This is Imbuga’s irony and satire on the relationship between the two generations. It also reinforces the satire on Denis. Bandi reports to

Denis that he recited his poem and came second in the competition. The poem entitled *Our Gourd of Wisdom*. The child's innocence and fascination are clearly communicated. Instead of going to call Yona as instructed by Elima, Bandi first reports his excitement to his elder brother whom he admires.

In *Act One Scene VI* the action continues at Agala's compound. It is in the night. Bandi's excitement is dramatized. True to innocence childhood he expects presents from the elder brother. He recites an old poem written by Denis which he calls 'From Home with Bananas.' Denis feels that the poem is Matilda's song. We learn that Yona has been circumcised and washed with water from the root of 'ikikuma' (43) not iodine which symbolizes modern medicine. The hooting of the owl signifies a bad omen (43). The two old men chase away the bird by uttering the words 'may your bad luck return where your mother came from' (note use of direct translation and cultural perception of women). Ironically the owl flies to Babu's home. The action in *Act Two* shifts to Denis' city house. Henrics and Dr Agbade are enjoying themselves and wining. It is Denis' birthday. Denis refers to the bottle of brandy as 'prodigal bottle returneth' and links it to himself returning from the village. This allusion to the biblical prodigal son and parallelism with the bottle are techniques use to satirize Denis.

The coming together of Henrics, Dr Agbade and Denis is quite dramatic. Henrics wants to open the bottle of brandy. He refers to it as 'the prodigal chaos' (46) and ironically says 'let us drink to the health of Cleopatra!' The biblical allusion of the prodigal son and Henrics replacement of 'son' with chaos describes Denis' life. The literary allusion to Cleopatra is Henrics' technique of hitting at both Denis and Hilda. Cleopatra is a character in William Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra*. Throughout the play male characters refer to Cleopatra as 'lustful gipsy.' Agbade proposes that they drink the brandy to the health of Yona, to which Denis agrees but warns '...keep it to yourselves. This is classified information' (47). Denis does not want his mistress to know that he travelled to the village for the traditional circumcision of his son. Agbade reminds Denis that Yona is not yet a man till the final rite is performed by Denis as the father. It is clear that Denis did not travel upcountry to attend 'The Burning of Rags' ceremony for his son. Both Agbade and Henrics admonish Denis for running away from his responsibilities as an African man. They both argue that society has become capital; '... man finds his greatest sense of happiness in outwitting man,' Henrics ironically says. We know he also wants to outwit Denis. Henrics even sarcastically refers to Hilda as Cleopatra (50).

He goes ahead to refer to Hilda's father as having no soul. This view contradicts Denis' view of Hilda's father. Both Denis and Henrics talk of corruption. Henrics accuses Denis of corruption: 'well, you are staying with a woman to whom you are not legally married. This is corruption of the highest magnitude' (50). Agbade agrees with Henrics. The action continues in Denis' house. Hilda has accessed the poem, *From Home with Bananas* and read it. The ambivalent character of Denis is dramatized. He is a pseudo-intellectual with no particular ideals or principles. When he lectures Africans he talks of 'corruption and pollution of our (African) sacred culture by foreign elements' (55), but when he lectures foreigners he talks of '...the advantages of the plurality of culture to all mankind...the need to reinforce our (African) own way of life with positive elements from other cultures.'

Act One Scene I ends with the revelation that Agala's depression is because of Denis' life-his refusal to heed to traditional requirements/practices; his westernization which conflicts with his father's traditionalism. The father wants his son (Denis) to be circumcised 'how many weeks before this year's circumcision?' (6) Agala asks. Here Imbuga puts the child at the centre of a clash of values, traditional and western. The child character thus becomes the prime mover of the dramatic action. Agala's claim that 'this world would be a much better place without women' (6), a claim that Elima agrees with, reveals male chauvinism and how society socializes different genders.

5. Discussions

The two plays have used local words such as '*busad*' in order to identify with the African culture since language, as Aor and Iorember (2021) put it, is an aspect of culture. Therefore, the views of these writers are African and

their opinions area about African children and childhood. Again, how characters in the play dress, both children and adults, play an important role that communicates and symbolises their culture and social status in the society (Navei & Donkoh, 2022). In *The Burdens*, Ruganda uses Nyakake and Kaija to introduce the action. We learn of the poverty in Wamala's family through the visual representation of Kaija from the stage directions. His short trousers are in patches. He also complains that Nyakake wets the bed; revealing that even though he is almost a teenager, he shares the bed with his younger sister. In *Act One Scene II* Bandi fetches stools for the two elders. Here the child is used to serve adults, innocently, as a cultural requirement. The conversation of the two conservative old men reveals that Denis must be around for his son to be circumcised. He has to perform the traditional rites; washing of the wound and slaughtering the white cock for the ceremony (16). Babu reveals his old generation values when Elima serves them with beer. He says "this is all we ask for. A wife who will hold the bible in one hand and the ways of her husband's forefathers in the other" (17). He sarcastically refers to Agala as old toad (17). The Scene dramatizes the generation gap differences. The child, Yona, finds himself between the two forces represented by his father and his grandfather. This is also the same in *The Burdens* as both Nyakake and Kaija are at the centre of their parents' domestic strife.

Throughout the Scene we see how Elima disagrees with the husband's old values. The entry of Babu into the action builds the tension between modernity and conservatism of the traditional cultural aesthetics. It is interesting how Babu frequently eludes to the Bible, though he backslid from Christianity long time ago. The confrontation between Henrics and Hilda in *Act One Scene IV* reveals that the two are former lovers; they have a son whose Henrics' parents are taking care of. Henrics wants to use the son to get Hilda back. He does not care about Denis' feelings. He even threatens to 'file a case against Denis for running away' with his wife (30). He gives Hilda an ultimatum of four weeks to think about the matter. Hilda's slapping of Henrics dramatizes the conflict between the two. Mr Fisher wonders after being slapped: 'I mean since when did a decent African woman slap a man?' (30)-to which Hilda retorts 'where is the man'

This brief Scene is significant in introducing a sub-plot to the action of the play. The child character plays a backstage role but is important in highlighting the ironies and contradictions in the lives of the elites; particularly their empty idealism and living two lives; having two faces. The curiosity of Kaija in Ruganda's play *The Burdens* is also used to communicate the ironies in a family; ironies that arise out of the struggle to survive in harsh conditions.

In *Scene V Act One*, the playwright uses *busaa*, a local brew, and Brandy to contrast Denis and his father. Denis' refusal to take the local brew dramatizes his alienation from his cultural roots. On the other hand, Babu's ambivalent character is highlighted; he doesn't mind taking a little Brandy (p.37). Interesting in Ruganda's play, *The Burdens*, local beer, *engul*, is used as a symbol of poverty and also to dramatize the change of roles and the struggles in Wamala's family.

Agala's conservatism is symbolized in his inclination towards the traditional brew. The idea of Yona being circumcised is introduced. Interestingly enough, Denis has no problem with it but he reveals that he has no time to wait for the performance of the traditional rites that a father is expected to execute. This reinforces the conflict in the play. To the old generation, it is a sign of a bad omen if a father does not perform the traditional rites associated with circumcision when his son is circumcised. The cross-purpose talk between Agala and Denis (p.39) when Denis talks of 'getting permission' reinforces their contrast and differences. The heated conversation between Agala and the son shows the emotions in Agala. Matilda's song symbolically closes the Scene and ironically echoes Denis' past life.

In this Scene the two children; Yona and Bandi are introduced. We see Bandi's excitement and his being used to run errands. Yona is only mentioned though we know that he is at the centre of the dramatic action and the conflict in the play. To the old generation the child is as symbol of the future; the future must be protected. Yona is not consulted in all this. He remains a passive character in a process the pits the liberal minds against the

conservative values. In *The Burdens*, the adults make decisions but the two children are shown, particularly Kaija, as being psychologically affected by the decisions. The constant fights between Wamala and Tinka deeply affects Kaija's dream of a flood of blood which foreshadows the tragic end to the play revealing children's sensitivity and how the actions of adults affects them.

The brief *Scene VI of Act One* does not put Yona in real dramatic action but reveals his circumcision. It is this initiation ritual that forms the centre of the dramatic conflict in the play. The Scene significantly reveals what led to Matilda's suicide; a quarrel with Denis. The old men, together with Denis agree that Matilda's grave be burnt down by a stranger to stop her 'shadow; from appearing to them. Ironically Denis concurs with the old conservative and superstition. Though a university professor he still believes in the cultural superstitions of his people. This is the playwright's subtle technique of satirizing Denis. The Scene ends with Denis promising to come back for the traditional circumcision ritual of 'Burning of the Rags' of his newly initiated son- a symbol of a rebirth, graduation into adulthood.

Through the technique of dramatic irony used in *Act Two Scene I* the playwright shows the mistrust and suspicion among the three friends. The subtext of all the mistrust involves the two boys. Henrics tries hard to hit at Denis. We know that Henrics had a relationship with Hilda. He is cunning and overtly vengeful.

He even warns Denis to confess to Hilda that he had a wife who died and left them a son. He ironically says, '... you would rather keep a woman from your affairs than keep off hers' (52).

We also learn that Hilda belongs to the women feminist movement but Denis views it as 'purely for academic reasons.' The Scene ends with Denis going to the kitchen to prepare food for his friends, though not directly involved in the dramatic action, children; Yona and Hilda's son are basic to the movement of the plot and the tension therein. They provide the plot's fabric and the conflict between the adult characters.

In John Ruganda's *The Burdens*, the two child characters, Kaija and Nyakake are placed at the centre of the play's dramatic action and are artistically used to communicate Ruganda's vision of a society torn apart by human strife arising out of poverty and the inability of Wamala and Tinka to accept and reconcile with their new living conditions. Indeed the tragedy at the end of the play is caused by the two's rigidity and irrational behaviour; the inability to accept one another and their new living conditions. At the end, their children become victims of their actions and society's mechanical approach.

6. Recommendation for Future Research

This study recommends that as children are exposed to torture and societal tension as witnessed in these two plays, more research should be conducted on the effects of such torture and societal tension on children. Some texts, novels or plays can be read and analysed to find out how the effects are also represented in the world of Literature.

7. Conclusion

The dramatisation of the theme of Children and Childhood in Ruganda's play, *The Burdens* and Francis Imbuga's *The Burning of Rags* clearly reveals the changing view of childhood from the African perspective. Whereas in many traditional African communities children were viewed as naïve, helpless and delicate beings to be protected by adults, Ruganda somehow deviates from this traditional view; though in Imbuga's play the child becomes the catalyst in revealing the generation gap differences and the consequences of the same.

Ruganda portrays children as part and parcel of the tribulations in society. The children understand societal problems, particularly socio-economic, and are affected by them. Both Nyakake and Kaija suffer from poverty. Though they are just children, the playwright gives them deeper insight into societal problems and human nature. The tension in their family creates anxiety in them. This anxiety is dramatised through Kaija's dream in

which the writer foreshadows the unraveling of the plot. Thus the children in Ruganda's plays are not marginalised or one spot characters but are essential to the dramatic action and the concerns of the play.

The dramatic action of *The Burning of Rags* uses Children and Childhood to reveal the ironies in human's lives, their ambiguities, suspicion and hypocrisy. That Yona is at the centre of the dramatic action, there is no doubt. He is symbolically used to satirize adults' values. Agala's death is a consequence of his conservatism and also the generation gap differences as dramatised in the upcoming elites and the old generation.

At the end of the play Agala dies before Denis burns the rags of his circumcised son. Ironically Denis himself is a rag; he believes in no clear ideals and has no particular culture; a pseudo-intellectual who is satirised together with his friends, Henrics and Dr Agbade.

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