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Alienation and Revolutionary Vision in East African Postcolonial Dramatic Literature

Introduction: Context/Phases of Literary/Revolutionary Practice

In the last forty years, there have been three phases in the writing, reception, and interpretation of African literature and hence its dramatic genre. These changes are the inevitable responses to the changing dynamics in politics and social and cultural values at ethnic, national, and global levels, all of which are the multiple effects of colonial and post-independent neocolonial disillusionment. Aspects of these “intricate and tangled relationships” and “fundamental discursive conditions exist across all postcolonial societies” (Griffiths 1990, 438).

The first phase of African dramatic literature encompasses its generic evolution from oral to written literature.¹ Scholars like Adedeji, Ulli Beier, Oyin Ogunba, Ola Rotimi, J. P. Clark, M. J. C. Echeruo, Karin Barber, Femi Osofisan, Nkem Nwankwo, Ruth Finnegan, and others have identified three stages of this evolution, from grove-rituals to village square to Western proscenium stage. These three stages constitute what I call the first phase of the life-form of African drama. The first stage, the grove culture form, consists of rituals, festivals, and other sacred religious occasions in African cosmogony. The second stage, the village square form, presents inter-communal dance and beauty competitions as well as proto-theatrical aesthetic dramas performed on raised wooden or bamboo platforms at popular inter-village junctions or at the king’s or chief’s palace. At this stage of African literary development, Western proscenium instruments of dramatic and theatrical performance were not available to the art. Instead, indigenous

artists relied on locally improvised aesthetic instruments to create spectacular dramatic displays that excited the audience.

The third stage of the first phase, the proscenium stage, contains more elements and features of social-political vision and revolution than the earlier two stages in terms of its intellectual, formalistic, and cultural crossbreeding of African and Western idioms and aesthetics. This enhanced form of socio-political vision was enabled by African writers' exposure to Western education and therefore the different theories of human rights, labor, economy, politics, and religion of Hegel, Marx, Engels, Nietzsche, Lenin, Fanon, etc. Since the African writers of the proscenium stage were mostly university-based academics in the humanities, they were exposed to various Western theories and philosophies of art, science, and metaphysics, including Greek and Roman philosophers and thinkers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Horace. Many of them had studied Latin, English, and French and had read the canon of Western poets, playwrights, novelists, and essayists such as Chaucer, Pope, Shakespeare, and Donne; the Romantic ballads of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats; and the moderns such as Yeats and Pound. This enabled them to apply their knowledge and experience to African literature and society within the context of colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial intricacies. Thus, the Africana scholars, critics, and writers converted their art to utilitarian value as an instrument or ideological weapon of social-political change in postcolonial societies. Indeed, their art was never for art's sake; although it was adorned with language and cultural aesthetics that had qualities of entertainment, it was never just a beauty-producing factory! For them, literature was the vehicle for a social and political ideology of liberation. There were remarkable "protest literatures" from Anglophone writers like

Soyinka, Achebe, and Ayi Kwei Armah from West Africa; Ngugi and Micere Mugo from East Africa; Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, and Athol Fugard from South Africa, and later in the 1970s, Tewfik al Hakim and Ebrahim Hussein from North Africa, among others.

The second phase of the evolution of African literature is the postcolonial period of newborn African independent states. During this period—a decade spanning the late 1950s to the late 1960s—Africana scholars, critics, and writers began the search for meaning, definition, authenticity, validation, and literary identity for African literature. This intellectual search for a philosophy, theory, and existence of African literature was meant to resist and deconstruct earlier European critical views that Africans were incapable of abstract philosophical reasoning and creative thought (Smith 1950; Idowu 1962). Thus, the revolutionary temper of African literature in the second phase of its evolution was in line with Foucault’s idea of “revolution” as the “courage of truth” (Foucault 1993, 17). The first attempt was to appropriate the literary enterprise to the service of political and economic liberation of Africa, both from the vestiges of colonial domination and from the corrupt neocolonial administrations of the newborn African states. Eldred Jones’s *African Literature Today* and Lewis Nkosi’s *Tasks and Masks* were remarkable efforts in the search for African literary identity; at the same time, they maintained a seemingly cultic commitment to the doctrine of political correctness, whereby African literature and socialist theorizing carried the cudgel on behalf of the oppressed masses against the State.

This second phase of African literature caught the fire of revolution in East Africa in the novels, plays, critical essays, and speeches of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a Mau Mau

activist against colonialism and believer in both Marxism and Fanonism who vociferously castigated the oppressive neocolonial regime of Jomo Kenyatta, even at the risk of exile. The place of Ngugi's revolutionary art in radical African social philosophy is pivotal. Thus Ngugi's two revolutionary plays form the focus of this paper.

The third phase of African literature is the period of relative emancipation of the field as it is being globally accepted as a form of world literature written in a variety of Western languages, a sort of hybrid literature arising from what Irele (2001, 10) describes as the "conjunction of impulse" from both African and Western linguistic and cultural traditions. This is the present state of African literature as it plunges into the twenty-first century. However, the literature still embodies elements of the first and second phases in its present third-phase status, which begins from a period of "innumerable critical approaches enunciated by a plethora of critical pundits spread all over African and her diaspora" (Nnolim 2000, 5). Today, African literature has begun to have definitive critical forms, derived from the African nature of knowledge and system of thought.ⁱⁱ

Drama may be categorized as the high priest of all the other genres of literature, especially because it is the most naturally close to reality and life situations. While Aristotle asserts in his *Poetics* that drama is "an imitation of an action," Cook and Okenumkpe (1983, 4) affirm that it is "a fluent expression" of the "actor's whole being"(ix). Its performative values give it active capacity as a pragmatic cultural practice. East African postcolonial drama, for example, is influenced by the socio-economic and cultural values at work in the mangled relations of the masses and the State under colonialism and neocolonialism. In turn, drama creates changes in economic, social, and cultural relations in the world. The interface of drama with African society has

consigned its activities to more relevance in influencing human social behavior and the transformations of human thought and reason. It does this through the redefinitions of its theory and practice as an instrument of social enlightenment and transformation of African society. In Africa, Asia, India, the United States, Latin America, the West Indies, Ireland, and other nations that share a history of slavery and neo-slavery, as well as colonialism and its ubiquitous variant neocolonialism, drama is an enterprise of “cultural nationalism”ⁱⁱⁱ and political practice and commitment to “political correctness.” African postcolonial drama is an interrogating dialogue with history, an attempt to transcend the boundaries of political, economic, social, and cultural alienation. In *The Empire Writes Back* Ashcroft, Tiffin, and Griffith (1989) accentuate the categories of “dislocation and displacement” which fuel the tension between the colonial imperial “center” and the colonized at the “margins.” The literary dramatists, playwrights, video-film artists, and producers erect themselves as the ever-present “Other” whose mission is to negate the excesses of the ruling hegemony and engage them in Marxist revolutionary “war” anchored on sharp ideological divides.^{iv}

Cultural, political, and economic domination can take the form of illegal seizure of governmental power, either through the barrel of the gun or election rigging, especially in unsophisticated democracies of the Third World. It can also include the expropriation of the national economy by a few aristocrats (who constitute the “State”), resulting in poverty and social frustration (as expressed in hunger, lack of access to health facilities, illiteracy); racism and ethnic discrimination; and low wages and inadequate medical benefits for workers. These conditions elicit revolutionary reactions, especially via the

Labor^v or working class in postcolonial settings.¹ The other form of revolt is the intellectual cold war fought by political writers, some of whom are intellectual, psychological, social, and cultural exiles. Wumi Raji (2001) argues in the direction of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral that

certain members of the emergent bourgeoisie, owing to an acute experience of discomfort and crisis occasioned by their marginality in terms of number and partial location, are, now and again, caught in a process of self-assessment and re-examination. The inevitable result of this is a negation of alienation; retracing of steps and a re-location among the masses of people... a process characterized by Cabral as “return to source.” (166)

In the African situation, this process of “return to source” is common among the postcolonial elite class who identify common grounds of political and economic deprivation with the lower-class masses and thus team up with them to fight the superordinate hegemony. In this group are political writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, as well as African political activists like Col. Abubakar Umar (retired); Gani Fawehinmi, a Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN); Barrister Femi Falana; Comrade Adams Oshiomole, President of the Nigeria Labor Congress; and others, to mention a few from Nigeria’s volatile political space alone. These are upper-middle-class activists who commit “class suicide” by descending their class ladder to join the proletariat in mass combative, revolutionary action. Further examples of these abound in contemporary history, journalistic writings, and the literary works of most postcolonial societies, which vociferously detail the effects of colonialism and its variants in the form of alienation and nostalgia. These devices of textual and dramatic presentation of colonial and post-independence problems become the power-drives behind the engines of rage, revolts, and revolution in ancient, modern, and contemporary history.

Thus, African dramatic literature, as in other postcolonial cultures, engages history and interprets it via its aesthetic and ideological instruments as a means of educating the people by opening them up to social realities.^{vi} This is the very “character” of two East African plays, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), written by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii, and *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982), written by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Mugo. My goal in this paper is to present a textual exegesis and sociological analysis of alienation and revolutionary vision in these two plays, which dramatically capture two phases of revolutionary struggles: the grim realities of colonial domination and the evils of postcolonial disillusionment in Kenya. African dramatic literature as a whole covers a wide spectrum. I have thus limited my focus here to Ngugi’s melodramatic plays for a close textual study. In these plays the melodramatic formula is effective as a dramatic strategy because it is capable of raising the entire mind of the audience to the very height of revolutionary action. In melodrama, there are usually two mutually opposing and antagonistic sets of characters placed on sharp ideological divides, namely the indexical characters of virtue and those of vice.^{vii} According to Crow (1983), the “audience’s indignation” is aroused as “vice is seen punishing virtue,” while truth and innocence are being submerged (45). This creates high spirits and can psychologically persuade the audience to take revolutionary action against the forces of oppression and exploitation. As such, drama becomes a formidable force in the hands of postcolonial playwrights like Ngugi and Micere Mugo from East Africa; Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, J. C. De Graft, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Efua T. Sutherland from West Africa; and Athol Fugard from South Africa. All of these writers use drama as an instrument of social motivation and “cultural education”; they create a “national

culture” using drama as a suitable means of informal education of Africans. This method of social and cultural orientation is anchored on the understanding of African human nature as a product of a combination of indigenous, colonial, and postcolonial experience. These values are used to train the masses and to educate them on the causes, processes, and rewards of active participation in the war of independence and the struggle for emancipation under all forms of neocolonial subjugation.^{viii} This form of drama becomes a philosophical school for training the oppressed and denied Africans in Marxist dialectics, whereby there is constant political and economic struggle between thesis and antithesis as an imperative process of “historical materialism.” The kernel philosophy of Marxist historical materialism is that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx 1859, 103).^{ix} Marxist-Leninist philosophy posits that the one material fact about the history of societies is the constant inalienable antagonism between two mutually opposing social forces—the “thesis” and “antithesis”—that is, the haves and the have-nots or the State and the masses. It is this recurrent material fact of world history that caused these social and economic philosophers to conclude that the history of all hitherto existing societies was one of class struggles. Thus, they believed that society was moving in the balance of antithetical progression of forces between the paradigms of political, social, and economic divides. Being conscious of these societal imperatives and being actively engaged in the “*aluta*” (struggles) is the essence of being and the focus of historical materialism.

Ironic Dilemma of Alienation in Ngugi’s Revolutionary Drama

According to Bernard Magnier (2008), African literature was “confined during the 1970s and 1980s to politically radical circles” (1). This statement undoubtedly captures the literary activities as well as the struggles against social, political, economic, and psychological alienation in the plays of Ngugi and Micere Mugo. Ngugi’s plays are less in number and have received less critical attention than his fiction, essays, and autobiographical works.^x His first novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), was followed by *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), which details the politics of rebellion and the betrayals of revolutionary leadership trust. His other fiction includes *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1980), and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). His nonfiction works include *Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary* (1981), *Barrel of a Pen* (1983), *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), *Moving the Centre* (1992), *Pen Points, Gunpoints and Dreams* (1992), and a miscellany of children literature. Ngugi’s plays—*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982), and *The Black Hermit*—have special social regenerative and revolutionary power, both in the reading of their texts and as catalysts of revolutionary rage wherever they are produced and performed on stage.

Two clear ideological arguments resonate in Ngugi’s *Decolonising the Mind*. One is Ngugi’s vehement stand against the linguistic and cultural absurdity of writing African literature in European languages like English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Lusophone, etc. The second is his critique of capitalism and its manifestations in economic deprivation and political domination, which he describes as “the rule of consolidated finance capital” (Ngugi 1986, 83). Here he addresses the economic alienation of the majority (the masses) from the means of production by the capitalists and aristocrats. Thus, as other scholars have noted (Robson 1979; Killam 1980, 1984; Cook and

Okenimkpe 1997; Ogude 1999; Gikandi 2000; and Ndigirgi 2006), Ngugi's works have captured the history and memories of the Mau Mau wars of liberation and the ironic turns of alienation and nostalgia in postcolonial Kenya.

Mineke Schipper (1985) has reiterated the archetypal notion of the literary dialectics between drama and society: "The idea of 'the world is a stage' and the theatre a 'mirror of the world' exists in many languages and is probably as old as the theatre itself" (2). In modern African drama, alienation is often mirrored as a microcosm of the social or class tensions in African society at different stages of its history. While *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* deals with the Kenyans' heroic resistance to the colonial domination of their economic and social life, *I Will Marry When I Want* mirrors the evils of neocolonialism and the capitalist exploitation in post-independence Kenya. It depicts the contemporary relation of labor and entrepreneur to the means of production.

Social alienation is relevant to the analysis of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, in the sense that the whole of the society's political, economic, and social life is dominated by expatriates—the imperialists—while the Kenyans themselves are alienated: deprived and disinherited of their natural rights such as national economy and political power. Shaw Handerson, the European imperialist figure in the play, dispenses injustice with relish and impunity. He hypocritically threatens to enforce more penal sanctions against Dedan Kimathi, the popular leader of the Kenyan independence struggle. When Kimathi keeps silent at the false charge brought against him, Henderson, the Justice of the imperial court threatens him:

I may warn you that your silence could be construed as contempt of court, in which case, I could order that you be sent, for a certain term, to jail. (3)

This situation is ironical. We see a clear case of injustice presented through melodrama. Vice now punishes virtue, and the course of injustice is, before our very eyes, prevailing over justice. This is because an expatriate figure, who represents an illegal imperialist government, expropriates power and uses it to suppress an indigenous, legitimate, and democratically acclaimed leader of the Kenyans. Kimathi represents the legitimate Kenyan political authority, because the masses acknowledge him as their leader. This ironic social situation in which a foreigner—an expatriate for that matter—dominates the source of political power and economy of the legitimate citizens of a nation, is a condition of social alienation. Further, the play’s physical stage, on which “darkness reigns,” is a metaphor for the whole of Kenya’s societal flux—a state of social alienation.

The stage direction reads:

Darkness reigns. Distant drums grow louder and louder until they culminate in a frantic, frenzied and intense climax, filling the entire stage and auditorium with their rhythm. (4)

This prefigures a general atmosphere of social “blindness,” confusion, and war; the “distant drums” signify the Mau Mau War drums. Thus it is made clear that the hitherto peaceful social atmosphere of the Kenyan pre-colonial society will give way to chaos and colonial injustice.

The stage direction in the following scene shows the Kenyans’ aggressive attack on, and revolt against, their socio-political problems of “domination, futility, isolation, discontent,” social dislocation, and exploitation (Asein 1982, 125):

Phase IV: An angry procession of defiant Blacks, chanting anti-imperialist slogans through songs and thunderous shouts:

LEADER: Away with oppression!
 Unchain the people!

CROWD: Away with oppression!
 Unchain the people! (5)

These kinds of social problems in any society “have been identified as elements of the general condition of alienation” (Blauner 1964, vii). The aggressive chant “Unchain the people!” not only denotes that the entire Kenyan nation is physically “chained,” but it also conveys a sense of metaphorical, psychological, and spiritual captivity and incapacitation of the Kenyan people collectively. In other words, the Kenyans are alienated from the means of human rights, social freedom, and justice. It is thus largely ironical that the White imperialists who are physical aliens or expatriates have literally turned the Kenyans into psychological or spiritual expatriates even in their own motherland. The strangers of the land, ironically, become the people exercising indigenous rights, while the original indigenes become aliens.

Dedan Kimathi, the heroic leader of the Kenyan anti-colonial struggle, is a visionary. He understands the social-psychological and spiritual implications of the alienating circumstance. Therefore, he vows never to surrender, but to fight against this social disease of alienation:

BUSINESS EXECUTIVE: (impatiently): Listen Dedan.
 We have won the war.

KIMATHI: (struck by the words): What?
Have your oppressors surrendered?
Freedom. We shall drive them out of our land,
this earth, my brothers.
Put our house in order.
Build anew. Oh, the years of pain!
And your spear-bearers,
where braves return under deafening
sounds of drums proclaiming victory?...
Break these chains. Unchain my heart,
my soul! Unchain four centuries of chains.
Kenya, our dearly bought,
fought for motherland. (45)

The Business Executive represents the Kenyan traitors—sycophants of the imperial authority. He appeals to Kimathi to give up the struggle. But Kimathi, recognizing the hypocrisy of the Business Executive, becomes more frenzied and more determined to fight this problem of political alienation, which has put the whole of his society into psychological “prison.” He refuses to join the Black traitors who have betrayed the Kenyan independence struggle:

BUSINESS EXECUTIVE: Plead guilty. Save your lives.
Join us!

KIMATHI: Cursed minds! Out. Out.
Neo-slaves. (47)

According to Coser and Rosenberg (1976), a social atmosphere of civil disorder, social and political conflicts, genocide, and frequent arrests and imprisonment “occurs only when society is passing through some abnormal crisis” (419). Indeed, this play describes an “abnormal” political and social alienation. In the play, we see that the “collective order” of the ruling imperial authority is unjust. Therefore, the oppressed

majority revolts against it. This creates a condition of “anomie (normlessness) and the break-up of integrated communities” (Merton 164). The state of anomie presented here is not just a literary construct from the playwright’s imagination, but a historical fact of the Mau Mau wars the Kenyans fought to resist British confiscation and domination of their ancestral lands after World War II.^{xi}

Prison as Metaphor for Psychic/Physical Alienation

In any modern African drama of alienation, the prison or cell can assume a metaphorical dimension that represents the “prison” of the collective human psyche, conscience, spirit, or soul in that society. In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Bode Sowande’s *Farewell to Babylon*, glimpses of this metaphoric significance are obvious. In the former, the rhetorical question that Kimathi asks, “What revolution will unchain these minds!” (47) shows Ngugi’s visionary awareness that the whole of the collective psyche—of the entire soul and spirit of Kenya—is in colonial “chains,” demonstrating the social and collective alienation of that society. However, the epic fortitude and heroic drive with which Kimathi resists all sorts of persuasion to surrender and fall flat to colonial domination, coupled with the consequent pronouncement of a death sentence on him, ironically point to the triumph of the spirit of human liberation struggle. In essence, it is a triumph for the Kenyan people as a whole. They refuse to surrender to colonial domination at the expense of their own blood. Kimathi’s blood becomes a redemptive force that would cleanse the society of colonial domination, and restore peace and social order—the necessary conditions to alleviate social alienation.

Ngugi and Mugo's *I Will Marry When I Want* approaches the theme of social alienation and psychological prison from the Marxist economic perspective, where the means of production is expropriated by the capitalist bourgeoisie, while the proletariat is exploited. The term "means of production" is central to Marxist theorizing about the State and labor in a capitalist political economy; it signifies the resources and apparatus by which goods and services are created, and it contributes to the process of exploiting the masses through cheap labor for excess value. Thus, the means of production represents a capitalist or feudal instrument of social, economic, and political alienation. This play captures the problems of exploitation, deprivation, and class segregation that characterize post-independence, neocolonial Kenya.

White Men in Black Mask: Neocolonial Alienation

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, where the White imperialists dominate the political power and economy, explores a situation of direct alienation, whereas *I Will Marry When I Want* deals with indirect or reversed alienation. The latter is a result of the domination of the state political and economic power, not by White imperialists this time, but by African capitalists—the contractors, merchants, entrepreneurs, and elites who are surrogates of colonial imperial power. They are to be figuratively understood as White men in black skin, Whites masquerading as Africans. They step into the shoes of the erstwhile European colonial expatriates and carry out the domination and oppression that are the criminal and inhuman legacies of White colonizers, creating a case of neocolonial or national bourgeoisie alienation. In *I Will Marry When I Want* these neocolonial

oppressors are portrayed by the business merchant Ahab Kwi wa Kanoru, his wife Jezebel, and Kioi's business partner Ikuua wa Aditika. These are "expatriates" in black skin who alienate the less privileged class, as typified by the characters Kiguunda, Wangeci, Gathoni, Gicaamba, Njooki, etc.

The dichotomy between the rich and the poor is symbolically and dramatically presented through the contrast between the type of furniture in the houses of Kiguunda and Kioi. The stage direction describes poor Kiguunda's home as

a square, mud-walled, white-coloured, one-roomed house. The white ochre is fading. In one corner can be seen Kiguunda and Wangeci's bed. In another can be seen a pile of rags on the floor. The floor is Gathoni's bed and the rags, her bedding. Although poorly dressed, Gathoni is very beautiful. (3)

Though presented against the background of poverty-stricken architecture and furniture, Gathoni is ironically imbued with the natural beauty of a diamond buried in the rubble. The paradox of life that pitches the "African queen" against the affliction of excruciating want and penury is an indirect, micro-level dramatic code that connotes the macro-level paradox of reversed alienation in the form of economic exploitation and the typical life of poverty that characterizes the class of the Kiguundas—the peasants—of the society.

The peasant life of poverty contrasts sharply with the capitalist life of luxury, as described in the stage direction for Kioi's house:

*A big well-furnished house.
Sofa seats, TV, radiogram, plastic
flowers on the table, and so on.
Electric lights. On the walls*

are several photographs. (74)

In this way the play presents the theme of alienation from the Marxist perspective of capitalism versus peasantry, where capitalism monopolizes the economy. In the play, both Gicaamba, the factory worker, and Kiguunda, Kioi's farm laborer, are being underpaid by their employers. This introduces the Marxist dimension of psycho-economic and industrial alienation, often explained in terms of job dissatisfaction and disincentive. Coser and Rosenberg (1976) have explained this dimension of alienation in the industry or workplace: "The workman is not in harmony with his social position if he is not convinced that he has his deserts" (418). In this play, Kioi refuses to pay his peasant workers wages that are commensurate with their high level of productivity. Instead, he selfishly complains:

KIOI: True
 But the workers cannot let you accumulate!
 Everyday: I want an increment
 Workers are, like the ogres
 said, two insatiable mouths.
 When they are demanding rise in wages,
 They are asking you for an advance.
 My mother is in hospital!
 My child has been expelled from school.
 Because I have not paid his school fees!
 My wife has just delivered! (78)

Haralambos and Heald (1980) have asserted that the social "contradiction" in a capitalist system "involves the exploitation of one social group by another... the owners of the forces of production" (2). They further observe that "the wages of the workers are well below the value of the wealth they produce" (13).

Religious Hypocrisy as Instrument of Reversed Alienation

Equally celebrated in this play is the classical Marxist idea of religion as the “opium of the masses”—an instrument of alienation, often used by the capitalists to keep the masses silent and obedient, while they exploit the latter. As such, the function of religion is to instill self-restraint, discipline, and anti-materialistic attitudes in the proletariat. Emile Durkheim sees religion as the “best school for teaching self-restraint” (Coser and Rosenberg 1976, 421). In *I Will Marry When I Want* Ngugi presents religion as an alienating mechanism in the satire of Kioi’s attempt to convert Kiguunda, the poor farm laborer, to Christianity. It is ironical that the capitalist Kioi and his wife Jezebel hypocritically persuade Kiguunda and Wangecito to have a Christian wedding:

KIOI: If you have agreed to our plans
 We shall now become true friends.
 Your house and mine becoming one,
 In the name of the Lord. (83)

However, the audience is made aware that Kioi is deliberately persuading Kiguunda to become a Christian so that Kiguunda can easily agree to mortgage his piece of land to Kioi. This is one trenchant example of a clever use of religion as an instrument of exploitation and subjugation, where the individual’s sense of rationalism is suspended and replaced with the consciousness of fear of hell instead of the love of God. It exemplifies involuntary and forced submission to wicked and hypocritical instruments of leadership instead of a sense of willing and conscious awareness of the extent and

limitation of law. In such instances, the appeal is made to subdue the consciousness of the victim's individuality and personality, and to activate the otherwise dormant sense of the ironic feelings of redemption through forfeiture of spiritual freedom, through religious captivity, of wealth through self-denial, denunciation of economic and social rights, and the doctrine that one attains life through death to material consciousness. While these teachings are entrenched in the philosophical doctrines of Christ, they are misapplied by the bourgeoisie as means of economic exploitation and deprivation of the masses.

It is an irony that the church in this play is indexical of moral collapse, the despiritualization, and the gross worldliness that have become the negative values that are antithetical to the true foundation of Christ's teachings. In modern society, the moral and spiritual partition between the church and the world has collapsed and the church has become a forum for ostentatious display of illegally acquired wealth, thus causing the entire institution to lose its focus as a last resort of the weak and humble, or a safe kingdom for the poor. No wonder Kiguunda cannot afford the recommended church wedding; the church has become a realm only the rich can afford. Thus, the march of social and economic forces has closed in on the church, and swallowed it up such that religion becomes an ironic instrument for the subjugation of the common masses. The post-independence African capitalists mismanaged the resources of their newborn states, and reduced government to a junta of victimization and oppressive policies.

Both Kiguunda and his wife complain that a church wedding is too expensive for a poor family like theirs:

KIGUUNDA: But there's a small problem!
 A modern church wedding

Requires a lot of things.
We cannot enter the holy church
The way we are
With muddy feet
And these rags ever on our shoulders. (84)

This also shows vividly that the church has become a materialistic, capitalist, and bourgeois social institution and thus another facet of social alienation. Thus, in postcolonial African society, the church has responded rapidly to the commanding imperatives of history that religion can be used as means of exploitation. Apart from the plays under study, several plays by African dramatists have employed invective satire to castigate this post-independence religious vanity. These include Wole Soyinka's *Jero Plays* and *The Road*, Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Femi Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*, and Bode Sowande's *Farewell to Babylon*, among others.

In *I Will Marry When I Want* the "hidden class war" (Jeyifo 1985, 11) is revealed when the rich Kioi's son impregnates Gathoni, the daughter of poor Kiguunda. Kioi's son refuses to accept the pregnancy. In a violent reaction, the aggrieved Kiguunda draws a sword to murder Kioi. Kioi sees any attempt by his son to marry the daughter of the poor Kiguunda as insulting, shameful, and a contamination of the family's economic pedigree.

He complains:

KIOI: I am a mature person, I've
been made mature by Christ.
And I can let my son marry
only from the home of a mature person. (101)

Here Kioi's concept of maturity cannot be taken at face value. It is a euphemism for economic maturity. For in many postcolonial African societies, the cultural meaning of "maturity" is material possession or wealth. And this idea, though latent in some precolonial customs and traditions, is made manifest and exploded in the modernity-induced postcolonial capitalism of contemporary Africa. For instance, the Yoruba peoples of southwest Nigeria have a pro-economic proverb that says, "*Owo la'gba, ojo ori la'buro*,"^{xii} meaning "money is the elder to older age." In other words, a young person who has money and wealth is considered more mature than even his/her older sibling who is poor. By this postmodern and postcolonial philosophy, maturity is directly proportional to one's measure or location on the economic scale. A form of this pro-capitalist proverb is also shared by the Igbo people of southeast Nigeria. While this proverb is not necessarily immoral, it underscores the deep influence of post-independent capitalist economic structure on Africans' traditional economic values.

In the precolonial era, the indigenous African philosophy of maturity and manhood was measured by good manner and character, and other such virtues as honesty, humility, bravery, and ability to work hard; a precolonial Yoruban proverb says, "*Owo ko to eniyan, ki owo to de ile aye, ogbon la koko bi*," meaning "human personality is greater than money, wisdom is the first offspring before the invention of money." However, this philosophical concept seems to have given way to a postcolonial and pro-capitalist change. The current version says, "*Bi o ba l'owo, bo loo ni imo, ete nii'gbeyin iru won!*"—"If you have no money and you claim to have knowledge, you'll soon know you're stupid!" The reality of the modern economy in the world at large, but especially in countries with postcolonial identities (where there are no social security/welfare

packages, and no jobs or job security), is that success in marriage, peace of mind, and comfort are predicated on economic determinism. Thus, the characterization of Kioi in this play is an example of art as social reflection. Kioi is a modern postcolonial capitalist personality. He is produced by contemporary forces and the values at work in the Kenyan social and political space of post-independent economic disillusionment. By disagreeing to his son's marriage to Kiguunda's daughter because of the latter's low economic status, Kioi is acting in consonance with the rational economic philosophy in contemporary Africa.

In response to Kioi's class pride and economic consciousness, Kiguunda draws his sword against Kioi: "This sword is my law and my court. Poor people's law court" (101). This is an example of active revolutionary temper. It denotes the alienation between adjacent socio-economic classes in the society. The religious sentiment expressed by Kioi is pretentious and deceptive, and Kiguunda reacts to this:

KIGUUNDA: Churches?

Let me tell you a thing or two.
Even if you were now to give me
All your clansmen have stolen from the poor,
Yes, the wealth which you and your Asian
and European clansmen and all the rich
from Kenya share amongst yourselves,
I would not take it. Just now. No amount
of gold or ivory or gemstones
Would make me let Gathioni
Marry your son. (102)

Kiguunda's violent reaction to Kioi's economic exploitation and religious hypocrisy precipitates the action of the final act, in which Kiguunda loses his job. In addition, his

small piece of land, serving as collateral security for the loan he secures through a bank headed by Kioi, is confiscated and auctioned. Here Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii present the lack of conscience of the African capitalists, who expropriate economic resources and exploit and suppress the peasants. In this situation of neocolonialism, it is not the White colonial empire that is now alienating the African masses. Rather, the African leaders who took over from the erstwhile British colonial administrators now behave more "White" than the Whites. Kiguunda describes the African capitalist oppressors and their Asian and European collaborators as "clansmen," for they share the same connivance and conspiracy to oppress the masses. Thus, we can deduce that even those Africans who fought for independence and later took over the administration of the new independent states are mere surrogates of the European imperial powers. Here we have the ironic situation of "the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau" in the very post-colonial experience of exploitation and corrupt governance of postcolonial Africa.

In their *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels assert that

in countries... where the peasants constitute far more than half of the population, it was natural that writers who sided with the proletariat against the bourgeoisie should use, in their criticism of the bourgeoisie regime, the standard of the peasant and petty bourgeoisie, and from the standpoint of these intermediate classes, should take up the cudgels for the working class. (64)

This observation is relevant to the way in which Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii handle the class clash of economic alienation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in *I Will Marry When I Want*, in which they literally take up the "cudgels for the working class." They present religion as a force that alienates humanity with particular reference

to Kenya in East Africa. By teaching the poor self-restraint, the capitalists put them in “prison” of perpetual poverty. No wonder the playwrights speak, through Gicaamba, as follows:

Why didn't Kioi come
To tell you that he has increased your wages?
Or to give you a piece of his own lands?
Yes, for the earthly treasures
Are not that important!
Or is it a sin to increase a worker's wages?
Religion is the alcohol of the soul!
Religion is the poison of the mind!
It's not God who has brought about our poverty!
All of us were born naked. (6)

However, the playwrights do not see Christianity as an inherently capitalist design or instrument. Rather, they highlight the unfortunate hypocrisy of the capitalists, who convert the enormous values of Christian anti-materialist socialism to an opportunity for exploiting the proletariat. In the same way, one could say that money is good but the inordinate and insatiable quest for it is the root of evil. Thus, the two plays become a dramatic revolt against postcolonial regimes that denigrate the masses and the citizenry economically, socially, politically, and psychologically, thus creating social alienation.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have addressed the problems of social alienation and exilic consciousness in African societies as depicted in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's two revolutionary plays. A complex structural pattern of alienation has emerged in this study. This type of collective alienation takes an aggressive, violent, and riotous form. It is, generally, in the

form of the Marxist idea of antagonism (antithesis) between the oppressor and the oppressed of each society. However, the type of social alienation observed in this study is more complex than the “thesis” versus “antithesis” proposed by Marx; neither does it fall into the “A” versus “B” principle of “binary opposition” (Culler 1975, 65) proposed by Structuralists like Ferdinand de Saussure,^{xiii} Roland Barthes, or Vladimir Lenin. Rather, it is in line with Levi-Strauss’s Structuralist theory of multiple opposition, whereby languages, kinship, marriage, customs, cultures, and beliefs of all societies in the world display contrasts and oppositional tendencies that underline their links and relations at the deep structural level (Sturock 1981). Thus the oppositions between White colonialists and African leaders and anti-colonialists, the opposition between African surrogates of White colonialists and the African masses, as well as the one between precolonial practices and postcolonial modernity, all reveal a common link that connects the antagonistic groups—“commodity,” which has been framed as being scarce and therefore compels desperate competition of the different groups for possession of it.

In Ngugi and Mugo’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, the political “war” is not only fought between the European imperial government and the Kenyan Mau Mau resistance forces led by Dedan Kimathi. Rather, some Kenyans, labelled as “traitors” refuse to take the Mau Mau loyalty oath. Instead, they join the European imperialists. Others are neutral, because they fear being branded as traitors if they join the imperialists, or being killed if they join the Mau Mau warriors against the Europeans. Therefore, the alienation problem in this play is more complex than the Marxist theory of “thesis” and “antithesis” form of social-political struggle. The pattern of social deprivation, distance, nostalgia, and dissonance that emerges in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is chronic or hyper social

alienation. By this I mean the ironic situation in which the White imperialists who are expatriates become the owners of the Kenyan economy and political authority, while the Kenyan citizens are treated like aliens or expatriates.

However, *I Will Marry When I Want* explores economic social alienation, where capitalists like the Kiois dominate the Kenyan national wealth, and alienate the proletariat, as represented by the Kiguundas. In this play therefore, the source of power and economy of Kenya is no longer expropriated by European colonialists, but by African capitalists. Thus, we infer that these African capitalists, having stepped into the shoes of the White colonial masters, are Africans only in the physical sense; in their actions and deeds they are Whites or colonialists. This ushers in a sort of class-consciousness and class division—the upper class (i.e., Kioi and Jezebel), the upper-middle class (i.e., Ikuuna wa Nditika), the lower-middle class (i.e., Kiguunda and Wangeci), and the lower-lower class (i.e., Njooki and Gicaamba). The two upper classes cooperate to exploit and oppress the two lower classes, while the latter also unite against the former. In general, this structural pattern perhaps best explains and even transcends the Marxist concept of economic and social class alienation in capitalist (industrial) settings. In this study, I use literary, textual exegesis and sociological theory to account for the causes, course, and effects of alienation as manifested in economic, social, and political distance, nostalgia, and dissonance in East African (postcolonial) dramatic literature. The study initiates an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis and literary interpretation of the processes of colonial and post-colonial experience as a way of provoking future study on how to evolve a theory of African experience via the lens of literature, with specific reference to Kenya.

Endnotes

ⁱ Niyi Osundare, "Oral-into-Written: Aspects of the Socio-Stylistic Repercussions of Transition," *Journal of African Comparative Literature* 1, no. 3 (1983): 3-16.

ⁱⁱ See Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyofo, eds., *Encyclopedia of African Thought* New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). This groundwork hopes to provide an African system of knowledge, epistemology, and critical concepts for the reading of African arts.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture," in *The Wretched of the Earth* Canada: Pelican, 1961.

^{iv} See Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (New York: Russel and Russel, 1925).

^v See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. Samuel Moore 1844 Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988.

^{vi} Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: 20th Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

^{vii} Brian Crow, *Studying Drama* (London: Longman, 1983).

^{viii} See Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture" in *The Wretched of the Earth.*, Canada : Pelican, 1961.

^{ix} Marx, Karl, 1859. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. ed. R. Rojas (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977).

^x For further readings see *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed., s.v. "Ngugi Wa Thiong'o."

^{xi} See C. J. Rosberg, Jr. and John Nottingham, *The Myth of Mau Mau Nationalism in Kenya* Palo Alto, California: New York: Meridian Books, 1966. See also Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Coy, 2005) and George Bennet, *Review: The Myth of Mau Mau* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

^{xii} There are many such Yoruban and other African proverbs that valorize money or wealth above old age, especially with the leadership problem of corruption and the consequent poverty that has engulfed the African continent.

^{xiii} See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Secheaye, in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Roy Harris. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court 1983).

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