

**Abuse of Power and Political Corruption in Post-  
independence Uganda: A study of John Ruganda's  
*The Floods***

**Muhammad Jalal Khalifa\***

**Abstract**

The works of Ugandan playwright John Ruganda (1941-2007) have primarily been concerned with the failure of decolonization and the concomitant abuse of power as an impediment to the realization of dynamic future. His purpose is to raise the social and political consciousness of the Ugandan masses and alert them to the massive abuse of power and political corruption that have spread in post-independence Uganda like a malignant cancer. His post-colonial play, *The floods* (1980), which will be the focus of the present paper, represents this phenomenon in his writing. The play presents a universal perspective of the human condition as victimized by power-hungry tyrants whose evil deeds have finally led to instituting a society of violence, apathy, and moral degeneracy. Ruganda exposes a system of exploitation based on a master-slave relationship, a system which is very much similar to that of the colonial era.

---

\*Azzagazig University Department of English Faculty of Arts

إساءة استخدام السلطة والفساد السياسي في مرحلة ما بعد استقلال أوغندا:  
دراسة لمسرحية الفيضان لجون روجاندا

محمد جلال خليفة

ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة إساءة استخدام السلطة والفساد السياسي في مسرحية "الفيضان" للكاتب المسرحي الأوغندي جون روجاندا (1941-2007) باعتبارها عقبة في سبيل تحقيق مستقبل حيوي للمجتمع الأفريقي. فغرض روجاندا من التركيز على هاتان الفكرتان هو رفع مستوى الوعي الاجتماعي والسياسي للجماهير الأوغندية بصفة خاصة والأفريقية بصفة عامة وتنبههم إلى الانتهاكات واسعة النطاق التي تمارسها السلطة التي تسلمت مقاليد الأمور بعد الاستقلال. فمسرحية "الفيضان" تقدم منظورا عالميا لحالة ضحايا الاستبداد السياسي من الجوع والإمعات الذين ساهموا بصمتهم في تأسيس مجتمع قائم على العنف، واللامبالاة، والانحطاط الأخلاقي. وبهذا يقوم روجاندا في هذه المسرحية بفضح النظم الاستغلالية المستبدة القائمة على أساس العلاقة بين السيد والعبد، وهي نظم مماثلة تماما لتلك الحقبة الاستعمارية.

In the immediate aftermath of its independence from European colonizers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Africa had entered a new phase of its postcolonial experience, a phase characterized by increasing disillusionment with national power-hungry leaders who aborted the great hopes and expectations that Africans attached to the new indigenous rule. The new national leaders have proved themselves to be as harmful to the nation as their colonial predecessors had been. Many postcolonial African authors have expressed their overwhelming disappointment with the gross abuse of power and with the political corruption under postcolonial leadership. For instance, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka states that his generation thought they "were on the threshold of not only rediscovering ... but of transforming" themselves "in a way which would astonish" their ex-colonial powers; they could not "envisage any power" to stop them. However, he assumes, it took them "a while to realize that the internal hazards" were their "principal enemy." (27)

Furthermore, Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o notes how the African middle-class born after independence was "busy, grabbing and amassing land and business concerns at the expense of the peasant and working masses"(35-6). As it is the case with most postcolonial African writers, the works of Ugandan playwright John Ruganda (1941-2007) have primarily been concerned with the failure of decolonization and the concomitant abuse of power as an impediment to the realization of a viable future. His purpose is to raise the social and political consciousness of the Ugandan masses and alert them to the massive abuse of power and political corruption that have spread in post-independence Uganda like a malignant cancer.

Ruganda graduated from the University of Makerere, in Kampala, which was "the center of critical literary debate for a period in the 1960s" and in which "many East African writers and critics met"(174). This was a time when a wide range of artistic activity aimed at stimulating the critical consciousness of the masses in order to help prepare them for political action. Ruganda was in the forefront of a nation-wide movement to create a lively theatrical scene in East Africa. He was so successful as to win "several play-writing

competitions" and was considered, along with Robert Serumaga, to be "the main force behind the development of the theater in Uganda in the 1970s and 1980s" (*Student Encyclopedia* 272)." In 1985, he went to Canada, where he gained a Ph.D. in creative writing from the University of New Brunswick in 1989. He has taught at the University of Nairobi, Makerere University and the University of North, South Africa. He also published six plays: *The Burdens* (1972), *Covenant With Death* (1973), *Black Mamba* (1973), *The Floods* (1980), *Music Without Tears* (1982), and *Echoes of Silence* (1986). His other notable works include *The State of Zombie* (2000) and *Igereka and other African Narratives* (2002).

Although Ruganda writes about his country Uganda, introducing his English-speaking audience to the political turmoil which has engulfed his country since independence, his interest is more than regional; his plays do have a universal significance and universal values. One of the typical universal issues manipulated in his plays is his treatment of the abuse of power and political corruption. His post-colonial play *The floods* (1980), which will be the focus of the present paper, represents this phenomenon in his writing. The play presents a universal perspective of the human condition as victimized by power-hungry tyrants. In this play, Ruganda is at his best with the realistic portrayal of corrupt and power-hungry tyrants whose evil deeds have finally led to instituting a society of violence, apathy, and moral degeneracy. He exposes a system of exploitation based on a master-slave relationship, a system which is very much similar to that of the colonial era. The new masters, the members of the ruling elite, have enslaved their own people, living in large European-style mansions while the vast majority of the people are on the verge of poverty. This close parallel signifies a true likeness between the exploitation once imposed by greedy colonialists and that imposed by the power-hungry post-colonial political opportunists.

Like many African authors whose work is closely in tune with Franz Fanon's philosophy of revolution (such as Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* (1966), Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960),

### **Muhammad Jalal Khalifa**

---

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Suns of Independence* (1968), and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, to mention just a few), Ruganda focuses on the revolutionary transformation of the present system established by the new African rulers. However, there is nothing of the violent revolutions of Frantz Fanon in Ruganda's plays. Fanon's philosophy asserts that "the colonial victim can only free himself from oppression by a socialist revolution and that the revolution must be achieved by violence" perpetrated by "the poor peasants, the wretched of the earth," who are still "uncorrupted by the inculcation of individualistic values" (Killam 13-4). For Fanon, violence is an indispensable tool to fight colonialism: "Face to face with the white man, the Negro has a past to legitimate, a vengeance to extract" (225). In *The Floods*, Ruganda, unlike Fanon, sees that the masses are not in a position to start a large scale revolutionary movement because, under the dehumanizing effect of violence and tyranny of neo-colonialism, they prefer either to remain silent in the face of inequity, or to passively acquiesce to the rampant moral corruption of the opportunistic exploiters. Playing the game according to the rule of "eat or be eaten," the masses turn themselves into submissive, wretched creatures incapable of independent thought or actions, and therefore incapable of changing the desperate socio-political reality.

*The Floods* is set on an island, ostensibly a place of safety, quickly threatened by forces not from outside, but ironically from within. Apparently based on the murderous regime of Uganda's Idi Amin Dada, and by extension other military regimes in Africa, the play is a scathing denunciation of the power-hungry politicians or military rulers. As the head of Amin's terror machine called the State Research Bureau (SRB), Bwogo personifies the character of the greedy politician or military who gives up his honesty and morality to obtain wealth and power through corruption. He epitomizes the amorality that infects the postcolonial leadership. He follows the lead set by his malicious father, an opportunistic politician who has risen from the lowest class to a privileged position by mischievously seizing the insecure political situation in post-independence Uganda only to accumulate wealth at the expense of his poor fellow citizens.

As the son of a rich man, Bwogo has access to elite educational institutions throughout the world. Although he has acquired a much better formal education than his working-class Ugandan peers, he has never achieved any academic advancement. However, he takes up a privileged position simply because he is the "Boss's" or the president's first cousin. In the meantime, competent university graduates are "grovelling in dustbins in search of sustenance." As his girlfriend, Nankya reveals his infamous progress:

Moses Bwogo by baptism. Bashir Bwogo by political expediency. Boarding schools all the way to Form Six. A brief spurt in the military academy at Sandhurst. Quit because the exercises were too rigorous. Several trials in schools of technology in Britain and eventually ends up in India. Commerce degree in Delhi. Five years of flopping and a sixth to fluke the B. Com. Under-Secretary in the ministry of commerce and accelerated promotions because he is Boss's cousin. (78)

Bwogo's character is strongly reminiscent of Wamala in Ruganda's *The Burdens*. Wamala is described as a parasitic, unqualified, and dishonest politician who, "on the eve of independence...had made his harangue effectively and had subsequently found himself Minister, with all the licensed and unlicensed accessories befitting his office" (v). This similarity between Bwogo and Wamala becomes a metaphor for most African politicians who have been corrupted by selfish, greedy pursuits that lead them to quick progress and easy profits.

Ruganda strives to reveal the way in which Bwogo, as a corrupting agent of the postcolonial state, negatively affects the lives of Kyeyune, an ordinary citizen obsessed with the daily struggle for survival, and Nankya, a university professor representing the passive intellectual who remains isolated from the political reality in her country and hence becomes unable to influence the trend of events. Although Kyeyune, an old fisherman, appears in only few brief scenes in the play, he is a living witness to the atrocities committed by

### **Muhammad Jalal Khalifa**

---

Bwogo and his men against their Ugandan brothers. Struggling to earn his living by fishing in Lake Victoria which surrounds his home island, Kyeyune confronts the gruesome reality of Bwogo's evil. To his dismay, he fishes out a dead military with "three long nails in his head, his genitals sticking out in his mouth," with "a big stone round his neck," and with "his belly ripped open and the intestines oozing out" (16). The scene is so shocking that the old fisherman begins to retreat into contemplation, trying to figure out the possible reasons for the slaughter of the soldier. He wonders:

What had he done to come to such an unmourned-for end? Had he, perhaps, in a moment of enthusiasm, uttered an unwelcome word to his masters? Had he, perhaps, through his own sweat and scrupulous saving, accumulated a bit of wealth which his extravagant mates had set their eyes on? Or did he have to die because he knew the secret ambitions of his masters? (16)

The repetition of "perhaps" underscores the prevailing confusion and uncertainty that characterize the Ugandan disturbing scene, a scene in which Kyeyune as well as his fellow citizens feel utterly uncertain of what comes next.

Kyeyune's inner turmoil sharply intensifies when he confronts a similar grotesque scene, that in which he discovers "a human finger in the bowels of a fish" (17). The trauma of the scene makes his mental acuity slip away. As Bwogo himself explains: "Poor fellow. Has never recovered from the experience. Goes about talking to himself all the time. Sometimes talks to trees and buildings. Any object" (55). Internally insecure and vulnerable, the old fisherman gives up fishing and takes refuge in madness, a strategy which can be seen as a physio-psychological escape from the disturbing images of violence. This escape from the insurmountable problems of post-colonial Uganda through madness and fantasy seems to be the only possible recourse for helpless people like Kyeyune. Interestingly enough, the words uttered by Kyeyune are not the seemingly nonsensical words of absurdist drama, but rather those organized,

purposeful words that metaphorically reflect a desperate socio-political reality.

On the other hand, Nankya represents a group of the intelligentsia who struggle to move to a secure position with the possibility of promoting up the social ladder, but their efforts are thwarted by power-hungry tyrants. The tension that exists between Nankya and Bwogo derives from the stark contrast between them. Unlike Bwogo, Nankya comes from an impoverished background. As a child, she has lived in total squalor in a "Dingy little room. Sharing it with rats and lizards. Cockroaches in the corners. Flies and mosquitoes" (96). Conversely, Bwogo has spent his childhood in a large European-style mansion with a "twelve-acre garden" and "a lovely swimming pool" (97). Hence, he grows up unaware of the desperate and painful circumstances of Nankya's life. Nankya asks plaintively: "Had you ever lived in a squalid little place? Hot as hell? Twelve square feet. Ten people?" (96).

In a tour de force which provides a kind of role playing, Nankya recounts her personal history which is replete with episodes that chronicle the exploitative world that has shaped her psychologically. Stepping outside of her identity for a moment, she plays the role of a young girl called Elizabeth and journeys back to bring the most shocking episode in her past to light: her mother's violent rape during her teenage years by four brutal soldiers.

They look at her and burst out with laughter. Mother freezes with fright. Taut like a bow-string. One of them rips her bra open. Horrible laughter. He commands her to lower down her school skirt. Her trembling hands just manage to do so. Horrifying bursts of laughter. Soon the four men are on top of mother, one after the other, before she passes out . . . That's how I was born. (129;131)

As the product of rape, Nankya gains insight into how this humiliating act becomes the very negation of a woman's being not only under



**Muhammad Jalal Khalifa**

---

colonialism but even after indigenous rule which strips a woman of her will and renders her passive and submissive to the will of abusive misogynists. It is, after all, a rough and painful experience which later leads to Nankya's withdrawal into passivity and subservience. Apparently, the rape of Nankya's mother symbolizes that of the Ugandan nation which has similarly been raped by military rule.

Nankya invites the audience to face the most important issue: have the changes brought about after the country gained independence made it into a better place? Her answer is an emphatic "no"; she explains that her "African masters have no manners. No time for decorum or decency" (75). The oppressor is no longer white but the black brother who lives next door and exploits the less fortunate, a likely source of his affluence and privileged circumstances. As Nankya grows up, her ideas never change, especially when her mother had to work for the Bowgo family, an action which comes to be seen by Nankya as a return to the oppressive master-slave system where the weak have no safe space to move into. As Austin Bukonya rightly points out, "Nankya's most vivid memories are of the time when her mother worked for 'Master', who happens to have been Bwogo's father" (70-74).

As an adult, Nankya is still haunted by the recurring memory of her mother denying her access to the "concrete wall with square holes" separating "the *Master's* mansion" from "The servants' quarters." She feels as if the wall were "deliberately designed to remind us of our poverty. Our unalterable station in life with no firm footing on the ground" (97). The concrete wall separating Nankya from the world of the rich fills her with anger and bitterness, and constitutes what can be termed as the master-slave inferiority complex. As she tells Bwogo:

By mother. The loneliness, the immobility and envy. That's when I began to appreciate the design of the wall, especially the square holes, because I could peep through those holes hours on end to get contact with the world beyond: you playing around with the dogs and chasing rabbits.

Or simply floating in the pool. And each time you caught me peeping through those holes, you'd call the dogs and charge at me with your toy gun. ... You had the right to come to our quarters, and I had no right to venture beyond the wall into the twelve-acre garden, sniff at the roses or see my face in the pool. Private property. No trespassing. And you dare ask me why I'm so bitter? (97)

It is this bitterness that affects the relationship between Bwogo and Nankya, a relationship which is viewed as one between dogs and rabbits, exploiters and exploited. Ruganda's metaphorical language creates symbolic patterns that underscore the themes of the play. The use of animal imagery shows how Bwogo gradually metamorphoses into a beast whose monstrous evil has become part of Ugandan everyday consciousness.

Significantly, Ruganda roundly condemns the widening gap between the new African privileged politicians like Bwogo and the downtrodden like Nankya. While Nankya is poverty-stricken, Bwogo owns a lot of houses, hotels and other business enterprises all over the country: "The Bwogo Estate everywhere in the country. The Mitchel Mansions. The Aphrodite Service Apartments. The Bay Bachelors. The Camasutra Hostels and Rainbow Tourist Hotels: you name it" (101). On the other hand, Nankya's background of disappointment and deprivation becomes the stimulus that motivates her to achieve academic success by receiving a Ph.D. in literature and becoming a successful university professor. Having received a significant academic recognition, Nankya develops a sense that she is finally gaining control over her life. Thus, she seeks to find her way to the world of the affluent minority, oblivious of the fact that this is a forbidden zone she has no right to tread.

Rather than orienting herself to the welfare of her people, she gets involved in a relationship with the destructively and aggressively controlling Bwogo who exploits her as a sexual object. Part of the conflict in the play focuses on the politician-intelligentsia relationship

### **Muhammad Jalal Khalifa**

---

showing the effect of political corruption on the intelligentsia. Bwogo's colonized mind-set, his misogyny, and his thirst for power are all turned against the powerless Nankya because she is still a virgin. As he puts it: "it is a miracle to find a virgin nowadays" (42). It is also clear that he channels his academic and social frustrations into violence toward Nankya. He manipulates her into having an affair with him, a relationship which is meant "to be platonic...Deep and beautiful. Beyond the dictates of the flesh and blood"(139). Yet, this calculated intimacy finally builds into asexual encounter. Nankya explains:

Six months of calculated abstinence during which time you had your sex orgies on the sly. 'Platonic,' you said. 'Our relationship is to be purely platonic.' And for a while I got caught in the web of lies. You are crafty. (42)

A heartless man who is out of touch with struggling humanity, he justifies his increasingly immoral deed by saying:

It doesn't pay to be pure, you see. To be pure is to be a failure. And the world is sick and tired of failures. Yes, the world has no room for those who are pure. Those who aren't successful. To wring success from the rocks of life, you have to be hard yourself. Hard and remorseless and unfeeling. That is the gospel according to Saint Success. (42)

This is one of the most poignant examples in which Bwogo corrupts indigenous moral standards through his immoral tendencies. His comment shows the disrespect an intellectual woman endures in the politician's eyes, even when the relationship is, at least apparently, based on love.

Presumably, Nankya fails to use her academic skills to alert the masses to the spiral of violence that engulfs Uganda and destroys its traditional values. Worse still, she seeks to gain access to Bwogo's privileged class in an effort to overcome the master-slave inferiority

complex that haunts her at every step. Ruganda's delineation of Nankya's character draws special attention to the hypocrisy of the passive intellectuals who have no moral obligation and social responsibility toward the communities they come from. Ruganda violently lashes out at academics when he says:

The academics are the worst. Perpetually donned in imported suits to hide their hypocrisy and their fear of competition. Wrangling over promotions, deservedly or not. Engaged in endless prattle on lofty subjects which they half understand or realize that they are neither witty nor relevant. They profess in academic freedom but the moment you open your mouth or challenge their view, they feel threatened. Dash to their brothers-in-laws to report that you are a Marxist inciting students to riot. (*Music* 64)

Indeed, for Ruganda, an intellectual's responsibility is to dispense knowledge to the masses and to give them hope so that they could face the challenges at hand. He shares with Kenyan novelist Ngugi and Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah a concern for the failings of intellectuals who betray the cause of the nation. In Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk*, for example, Loyaan's father says that General Muhammad Siyad Barre has nothing to fear from intellectuals:

The General fears no threat which might come from you and your lot. You have no common ideology for which you fight. You have no organized protest. Skirts. Air tickets to Europe. Posh cars. These are what you are after. Security provides them and you are no threat. (93)

Nankya represents the passive intellectual who feels quite satisfied with her stable career and does not show any fair amount of concern for the problems of her society. Although she holds a privileged position as a university professor, she fails to wield any influence in the politics of her country. To make matters worse, she

### **Muhammad Jalal Khalifa**

---

fails to exert any guiding influence on Bwogo. Rather, she yields to his destructive and foolish designs and loses herself in the process. With the discovery that she is pregnant, Bwogo dismisses her as a nuisance. It is this rejection that transforms her from a passive intellectual, who, by deserting a precarious existence for a stable career, has obliterated her presence and influence in the Ugandan community, to someone who is eventually willing to expose Bwogo's and Boss's atrocities to the international community. Subsequently, Bwogo thinks of her as a potential troublemaker who threatens the security and peace of the nation. Hence, he decides to deprive her of life by drowning, just as he had obliterated her identity earlier.

The most elaborate example of abuse of power and the prevalence of political corruption is Bwogo's misuse of the national radio to warn the inhabitants of the island, but virtually to trap Nankya into death, that an imminent flood will be sweeping the island. In order to escape the flood, the islanders are urged to rally on board of a boat that is supposed to take them to a safe haven. The irony is that the "crafty" Bwogo perversely manipulates the islanders away from their safe world and toward his dangerous and insane world. Unlike Noah's boat, Bwogo's is intended not to save the innocent civilians but to massacre them at the hands of the SRB. In its symbolic dimension, this act can be read as a kind of punishment of the masses who choose silence as a tool of personal salvation. As it turns out, they are not immune from the sadistic inclinations of the power-hungry tyrants who are promoting evil at every opportunity.

This interpretation proves highly feasible especially when we bear in mind Kyeyune's emphasis that the island is susceptible to harsh punishment because Nyamugondho is culpable for raping Nalubale, the goddess of the lake, and impregnating her. It is this act of infidelity that caused havoc on the island:

For every thrust he made, we witnessed waves of destruction on the island; for every ejaculation, floods ravaged the entire island to avenge her lost chastity. Since then we have witnessed several floods, some mild, some mighty. On the whole we have gone on

fishing and tilling the land for sustenance. But now we can no longer resist the call of the beckon. (19)

Like Nalubale, Uganda has been raped by military rule while Ugandans, unawares, are pursuing their own personal goals.

Bwogo's primary purpose in tricking all the islanders to the boat is to lead Nankya to her doom. He shows no moral responsibility toward the anticipated total destruction of the islanders. For Nankya, "an entire island wiped off for no apparent reason!" (57). She cannot resist seeing him as a "vampire sucking the blood of his kindred" (105). Kyeyune explains that the world around him "is falling to pieces, corpses upon corpses along the streets, in the jungle and in the lake, but no one takes heed of the squeals of terror in homesteads being deserted" (72). Bwogo is justifiably described by Kyeyune as "an ogre" that "has turned against its kindred" (20).

The audience is profoundly shocked when Bwogo provocatively talks about the victims whose bodies are ravaged by Lake Victoria. The very incarnation of corruption and abuse of power, he is clearly not inclined to show any sympathy for the victims who are too vulnerable to avoid being caught in his trap:

...this lake harbours its own unfathomable secrets.

... It has been the tomb of many men. And you, too, know it. Lorryfuls of wailing civilians, driven to their death over the cliff, at the point of bayonets. The crocodiles have never been more thankful. (25)

It is rather ironic that the bottomless ruling elite, who exploit the downtrodden as a source of their material comfort and obesity, have a very close affinity to the insatiable crocodiles that took the victims into the dark depths of their bellies. The cruel fate these innocent people suffered at the bottom of the lake is no better than their fate on the land. If the lake swallows them up within its waters, suffocates them and renders them vulnerable to the bottomless crocodiles, the predators on the land engulf them with their power and render them

**Muhammad Jalal Khalifa**

---

completely impotent. And while the lake is their final abode, their burial ground, the land has always been a vast cemetery for them.

Ironically enough, the very institutions that are created to protect the citizens from all kinds of harm are deliberately intimidating, exploiting, and victimizing them. Bukenya comments that, in a society built on the creed of enslavement, "government leaders are not only bent on enriching themselves at the expense of their people but are also the main agents of insecurity and unhappiness to the people" (48). Highly conscious of the corrupting influence of the ruling elite and how they strongly control the mass media, Kyeyune, like Nankya, regards the radio warnings with deep skepticism:

The radio said this, and the radio said that! What don't we know? What did the radio say about Mukanga? That he was run over by a tractor. And didn't all of us see them dragging him from his hut – or have you forgotten? The radio said this, the radio said that...you go on. (15)

By drawing a parallel between the announcement of an ordinary man's death over the national radio and Bwogo's announcement of the fake floods, Kyeyune accentuates some of the alarming manifestations of corruption and abuse of power that are plaguing and sabotaging the nation. Osotsi Mojola demonstrates that Ruganda's scathing attack on the widespread corruption and abuse of power reaches its apex in *The Floods* whose:

title is, however, deceptive because it may give the impression that most of our tragedies and sufferings are due to natural calamities...to floods. Ruganda's thesis in this play seems to be different. He is suggesting that most of our suffering and tragedies are not the work of angry nature, but the result of the manoeuvre of selfish and egocentric power, luxury and bloodseekers; men living off the sweat of others. (47)

As it turns out, the tyrannical rulers forget their African background as they become intoxicated by power and wealth and do not know when or where to stop.

As a punishment for their unjustifiable silence, ordinary people like Kyeyune and passive intellectuals like Nankya undergo a great deal of suffering at the hands of tyrannical regimes. In *The Floods* the gross abuse of power and its corruptive influence strikes both the rulers and the ruled alike. In an interview with Mikaele Dolfe, Ruganda expresses his disappointment with the passivity of the masses:

How does an MP feel when he decides to build a Kshs. 3m house, tantamount to a monument over himself? What makes the masses contribute money to such a thing, even when they might not even have food for the next morning? The masses fascinate me a great deal. The poor man aspires to be very rich, because according to the myth, you can do anything as a rich man. (53).

Unlike Fanon who thinks that it "is within this mass of humanity...that the rebellion will find its urban spearhead" (129), Ruganda believes that the masses have, by succumbing to the will of power-hungry tyrants and by learning to exploit the system, become chaotically corrupt power brokers. With the collapse of the moral infrastructure of the masses, it was hard for them to bring about any new social and moral order.

Although Ruganda sees the masses as hopelessly passive, mere puppets manipulated at will by power-hungry tyrants, he does not overlook their dormant colossal force. For him, the people of Africa are like a giant, long held captive. To end this captivity, Africans need to stop seeking personal salvation and to engage instead in more meaningful collective opposition that could overthrow forces of destruction. This process could never be accomplished without the intellectuals helping the people of Africa break the chains and guiding them irresistibly toward the light. That is why Ruganda condemns



**Muhammad Jalal Khalifa**

---

Nankya's submission, hypocrisy, and unwitting complicity in her own oppression. As Kenyan playwright Francis Imbuga explains:

By aligning Nankya with the murderous Bwogo, Ruganda seems to be suggesting that her passivity in the face of all the atrocities which Bwogo has committed makes her as guilty of the crimes as Bwogo himself. (297).

The scope and intensity of Nankya's guilt are magnified in Bwogo's accusation that she is no better than him because she is unable to accept blame and responsibility for her own failings.

We all have our little shortcomings, our little idiosyncracies here and there. Bread to earn. Our lives to keep. Future to think about. Nasty memories to forget. If I have signed death warrants once in a while, is it any worse than you failing your students? Is it? Murdering and burying their future by the stroke of your pen? Is it? (95)

After his unsuccessful attempt to get rid of Nankya, Bwogo goes into a long series of emotional and physical violence against her, a futile practice which culminates in an unabashed longing for a past that may never have existed, a past that seems to be no less uncertain and insecure than the present.

**Bwogo:** There's no need to fight each other. To find out the winner. You made your point. Let's just be friends again. (*realizing he is bringing her round to his point of view*) Remember when we had just met? At the zebra crossing. Opposite the post office. Along Republican Road?

**Nankya:** Your Mercedes-Benz screeching in my ears.

**Bwogo:** Picnics every weekend. Movies on Mondays. Dining and dancing on Wednesdays.

Parties on Fridays. They called us the 'inseparable ones'. Do you remember?

**Nankya:** (*breaking away from him; sits down*) It was good when it lasted. (120)

The protagonists try to momentarily escape the horrors of the present by succumbing to a wave of nostalgia for the past. For a moment, it seems as if they were reconciled, as if there were the chance to start over and rectify past wrongs.

**Bwogo:** We all have our needs and weaknesses . . . But it was beautiful. I have no regrets.

**Nankya:** That's what you say.

**Bwogo:** It's true. The only trouble is you want me to do things your way.

**Nankya:** And you want me to do them your way.

**Bwogo:** That's the trouble . . . Can't we just be? Cut out the cat and rat game? (139)

In their most optimistic moments, they yearn to release themselves from any connection to the disturbing realities of the present. In an effort to liberate themselves from the harsh realities of the present, they move spontaneously into role-playing, a strategy that "allows people to explore the potential of their own physical presence as they realize that *they hold within themselves* the power to present themselves in several different ways to the society" (15). Unlike Bwogo, who "begins acting crazy in order to distract Nankya from her strong position of assault on his guilty conscience" (Imbuga 207), Nankya consciously acts out scenes from life and fiction that portray what is important to her, and she role-plays scenes from the past showing the viewers how her life was made excruciating due to the ubiquitous presence of political corruption. Thus, role-playing allows Nankya to express herself in the first place, using roles to expose the secrets of the past that her fellow citizens must learn and use to rescue the country from coming to a horrible end. Through role-playing, she tries to find some means or other to reach out to her fellow citizens.

### **Muhammad Jalal Khalifa**

---

Playing the role of Elizabeth, the Chairperson of the Women's Liberation Movement, she is surrounded by journalists who come to her house to congratulate her on winning ten-thousand dollar reward for championing woman's cause. Interestingly enough, the role she plays in front of the journalists ends a lifelong struggle with selfish ambitions and culminates in a construction of a new consciousness as a political activist who chooses the path of resistance. Asked by a journalist about what she intends to do with the money, she says: "Arm my people. My comrades in arms.... Arm the Patriotic Front down south. They need every penny of the prize" (32). This comment discloses her desire to get her influence across to the public sphere. Understandably, this is the only role that leads to her inner fulfillment.

The protagonist is finally given a role that allows her to rise to fuller consciousness. Recognizing her importance in her people's life, she enthusiastically joins their cause. Evaluation of Nankya's stance raises an important question: how could she allow "herself to be locked up in an impotent love-hate relationship with Bwogo, a well-known agent of death," a practice which is seen by the dramatist Francis Imbuga as "the greatest betrayal of the common people by Nankya"(184)? The only possible explanation is that any citizen, once caught in the web of a monstrous person like Bwogo, would have no escape. The more Nankya struggles to escape, the more entangled she becomes. Imbuga makes it clear that the only escape from this relationship "is the death of either party, as is evident when Bwogo makes elaborate plans to kill Nankya through his scheme of the fake floods and the rescue mission" (56). Ruganda seems to be insinuating that in any political confrontation between the corrupt politician and the intellectual, the former is bound to win. Hence comes the importance of role-playing technique which helps Nankya assume yet another identity and consequently free herself from her weaker self which has been trampled upon by Bwogo.

Finally, both Kyeyune and Nankya represent ordinary citizens whose culture of silence made them unwittingly turn a blind eye to the plundering of the country's resources, raping women, and killing

innocent people at will. As a consequence, their life is terribly shaken by the powerful controlling force of the political opportunists and nation-wreckers. As Imbuga explains: "In any case, Nankya's and Kyeyune's silence may signify the extent of the oppression and the insecurity of the political situation" (285). Nankya comes to the conclusion that the whole nation, like the island, is damaged beyond repair. And so, she finds no solution but a bending humiliating downfall through violent revolution.

A coup, maybe. The land is caved in with corruption. The atmosphere hangs heavy with various grievances. Men deprived of the land they fought for. By Boss. Mercenaries terrorising the populace....Graduates grovelling in dustbins in search of sustenance; the Civil Service sore about MPs' salary hikes; temples tainted with martyred blood and, above all, uncertainty and death. Death stalking the streets like thousands of soldiers on the beat. The situation is real bad. It will either be assassination or a bloody coup. (40)

Apparently, the only hope lies in the elimination of the dictator in preparation for a fresh start. Kyeyune stresses the need for a martyr who has to atone for the sins hovering over the whole island. He calls on Bwogo's death as a part of a transforming process that Uganda urgently needs.

For sure we need a deliverer. A martyr to atone our sins and appease the daughter of the lake. Will it be Master, our Master, unknowingly drawn to the scene of action? Will he sacrifice himself to save the few that remain? Or will he be the hand through which chastisement will come upon us? (72)

The play ends with a group of soldiers coming to arrest Bwogo. Bwogo's arrest seems to represent something larger: the end of an era.

### **Muhammad Jalal Khalifa**

---

It can be read as a defeat and annihilation of power-hungry tyrants. Ruganda's comment on Wamala's downfall in *The Burdens* is applicable to Bwogo's condition: "There is always an extra rung to climb and a ready audience to cheer you on, and on, and on...until one day the axe falls and you are all alone" (v).

In the play's ending, Ruganda implies that there is no place in Uganda for the new indigenous colonizers. In almost all of the African plays of this period, revolutionary thinking hangs over the characters and their actions; most of the plays end with violence. Francis Imbuga's *Man of Kafira*, for instance, ends with Regina's murder of the Boss.

*(Slowly Regina turns and walks towards Boss. She has already drawn out a knife and is concealing it from the rest of the people. Suddenly she leaps at Boss and stabs him in the chest. Slowly Boss bends over as Regina retreats, after dropping the knife.)* She has . . . She has stabbed me. She has. . . Oh, no, not a woman. (100).

Unlike his contemporaries who look at a military coup as "a creative purge of the rotten political system" (*Achebe Encyclopedia* 109), Ruganda does not end his play with a violent military crackdown that would result in a massacre. Significantly, there is no direct mention of Bwogo's destiny, which may end with brutal death. The ending is symbolic of what is to come; it offers some optimism for the future of Uganda. With an eye toward the future, Ruganda stresses the need for Ugandans to practically cooperate with one another to build a better, more secure future for the country.

### Works Cited

- Booker, M. Keith. *The Chinua Achebe Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood ; Oxford : Harcourt Education, 2003.
- Bukenya, Austin. *John Ruganda's The Floods*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986.
- Dolfe, Mikaele. "Interview with John Ruganda." *New African* (December 1980): 50-51.
- Fanon, Frantz. "The Fact of Blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Mac Gibbon and Kee, 1952.
- Farah, Nuruddin. *Sweet and Sour Milk*. Minnesota: Gray wolf Press, 1992.
- Gates, Henry Louis. "Wole Soyinka: Writing, Africa and Politics." *New York Times* (2009 ): 27-8.
- Imbuga, Francis Davis. "Thematic Trends and Circumstance in John Ruganda's Drama ". The University of Iowa, 1991.
- .....*Man of Kafira*. Electronic Edition by Alexander Street Press, L.L.C., 2009.
- Killam, G. D. *An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi*. London: Heinemann, 1980.
- Killam, G. D. And Alicia L. Kerfoot. *Student Encyclopedia of African Literature*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008.
- Mojola, Osotsi. "*The Floods*." *The Weekly Review* (August 1980): 47-48.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Homecoming: Essays on African & Caribbean Literature Culture and Politics*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1972.
- Ruganda, John. *The Burdens*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- ..... *The Floods*. Electronic Edition by Alexander Street Press, L.L.C., 2009.
- ..... *Music Without Violence*. Electronic Edition by Alexander Street Press, L.L.C., 2009.