

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN TWO SELECTED EAST AFRICAN PLAYS

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Abstract: This project, *A Critical Analysis of Social Injustice in Two Selected East African Plays*, critically examined the theme of social injustice as portrayed in *The Floods* by John Ruganda and *Inheritance* by David Mulwa. The plays were chosen purposively for their deeper depiction of social inequality. The study explored how social injustice was represented in *Inheritance* and *The Floods*. It also identified the social injustices portrayed in these works and further examining how these representations shaped the central messages conveyed by the playwrights. The project focused on how the plays depicted corruption, class struggles, oppression and resistance. The study specifically analyzed how these injustices influenced character development and plot progression. Social Conflict Theory, particularly Marxist principles, served as the guiding framework for this analysis. This theoretical approach enabled the exploration of how the named social injustice were dramatized in both plays. Additionally, the study investigated how the playwrights critiqued social injustice through symbolic elements. These elements include representations of leaders, the oppressed classes and institutions of power. By examining the conflict between the ruling elites and marginalized groups, the analysis revealed how these dynamics reflected broader struggles within East African societies. The study used a descriptive approach. It focused on detailed textual analysis, thematic coding and discourse analysis to identify recurring motifs of social injustice. The analysis highlighted how language and dialogue revealed underlying social justice dynamics. It also focused on specific scenes, character arcs and literary techniques. The comparative analysis uncovered the distinct ways each playwright approached similar social issues, offering insight into their differing perspectives on social injustice. The findings contributed to a deeper understanding of how social injustice is portrayed and critiqued within East African plays. This offers insights into the playwrights' commentary on social issues. This project engaged with broader discussions on social injustice in African literature, providing a comparative analysis of two seminal works and offering perspectives on the resonance of social inequality in contemporary East African society. The study also suggested directions for future research, particularly on the intersection of social justice and literature in East African contexts.

Keywords: Focus: East African plays, Target population: *Inheritance* (2004) by David Mulwa and *The Floods* (1988) by John Ruganda, Theory: Social Conflict Theory, Major themes of social injustice: Corruption, Class struggles, Oppression and Resistance

1. Introduction

Post-independence East Africa has witnessed profound political and social upheaval. This era has been characterized by elite consolidation of power and other social injustice. In this context, plays have become an essential cultural form for articulating civic grievances. Its contesting official narratives and imagining alternative futures. This study offers a comparative analysis of David Mulwa's *Inheritance* and John Ruganda's *The Floods*, focusing on how each dramatizes social injustice through their own artist works.

While *Inheritance* critiques Kenya's post-independence elite and their betrayal by those in leadership, *The Floods* portrays Uganda under military dictatorship, examining the role of state terror and propaganda in silencing dissent. Despite their different national contexts, both plays share a commitment to interrogating the abuse of power and the resulting effects of social injustice.

This study applies Social Conflict Theory that connects the plays to ongoing socio-political realities in these two countries. For instance, in Kenya, there are injustice such as land evictions in Mau Forest, forced budget bill and repression faced by the Gen Z. While in Uganda, there is repression of political opposition and the weaponization

of development language. These, therefore, demonstrates the continuing relevance of plays in contemporary East Africa.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Plays in East Africa

Plays in East Africa has long served as a crucible for political dialogue. Soyinka (2001) and Odhiambo (2014) observe that African play often critiques authoritarianism and elite betrayal of postcolonial promises. However, as Kamau (2015) notes, few studies adopt sustained comparative and intersectional frameworks that situate multiple plays within broader ideological and cultural structures.

This study on the other hand, joins other scholars by analyzing the social injustice meted on individuals by those they entrusted their life and positions of leadership with. It further provokes audience that unless, they stand against social injustice; no one will come to their rescue.

2.2 Critical Studies on *Inheritance*

Mwaniki (2013) and Otieno (2017) analyze *Inheritance* in the context of Kenya's land reform failures. They emphasized elite manipulation and legal dispossession. However, these studies lack a robust performative or ideological analysis that connects the text to embodied resistance on stage or comparative East African concerns. Other hand, this study critically analyzed social injustice done by the elite and the mass stood up against this injustice by retaliating. Furthermore, the study embraces a comparative analysis in the two plays.

2.3 Critical Studies on *The Floods*

Kamya (2016) explores Ruganda's Brechtian strategies, while Namutebi (2019) examines the play's rhetorical structure and symbolism. Although insightful, these studies often overlook how the play portrays gendered violence, performative repression and audience impact. Furthermore, few scholars analyze the play alongside *Inheritance* to reveal regional dramaturgical and ideological parallels thus justifying the need of a more insightful approach which in this study.

2.4 Synthesis of Theoretical Lenses

Ramose (2016) and Muzondidya (2018) argue that African literary analysis benefits from fusing Marxist and postcolonial frameworks. However, this study underscores their position by embracing one of the theories. This was purposively done to allow for a focused and deeper examining. The study examines this through the lenses-Social Conflict Theory (Marx, Gramsci, Weber), to analyze how these plays perform, critique and embody resistance.

2.5 Audience Reception and Cultural Legacy

Historical reviews (Daily Nation, 1978; New Vision, 1976) show how both plays catalyzed civic reflection. Additionally, new oral interviews Audience responses have affirmed that the playwrights have demonstrated that indeed social injustice do exist and should be frowned up. These plays serve not only as art but as civic pedagogy and cultural memory (Noble, 2004).

3. Theoretical Framework:

Synthesizing Ideology, Embodiment and Class struggles

This study employs a triadic theoretical synthesis:

Social Conflict Theory explains structural inequality and class conflict (Marx, 1867; Weber, 1922; Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is especially key in analyzing how elite ideology is normalized.

The framework offers an integrated lens for decoding textual symbolism, power relations and performative

resistance. They also provide a bridge between the narrative content and the audience's embodied experience.

4. Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework is informed by the interplay of three core concepts. Firstly, power and hegemony which draws on Gramsci's theory. This framework examines how dominant elites maintain control. They do these not only through coercion but by manufacturing consent via cultural and ideological apparatuses. The plays are analyzed for how they expose and subvert these hegemonic narratives.

Secondly, postcolonial resistance which is grounded in Ngũgĩ's and Fanon's critique of neocolonial state structures. The framework conceptualizes land dispossession and state violence as ongoing colonial legacies that the plays dramatize and contest.

Thirdly, performance as political practice which is inspired by Schechner. The framework views performance as both a reflection and an enactment of social power relations. The embodied experiences of characters and audience reception are essential in understanding how resistance is communicated and internalized. This conceptual framework guides this analysis. It links textual elements, ideological critique and audience engagement to understand the stages of injustice portrayed.

4. Methodology

This research employed a multi-method qualitative approach. The study used thematic Coding. Among others, it explored discrete instances of injustice, repression and resistance. These were comparatively examined across both plays.

Moreover, close textual and discourse Analysis was employed. Several cases of scenes per play were analyzed. These was done to unravel the ideological language, power dynamics and symbolic staging.

Archival research was accessed to review censorship reports from the Daily Nation (Kenya National Archives). Furthermore, New Vision (Makerere University Library) was also explored. This was done in order to confirm cases of social injustice. Particularly, corruption, oppression, class struggles and resistance.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Institutionalized Corruption by the Elite Power

In *Inheritance*, Lacuna Kasoo justifies land dispossession by invoking modernization: "We are modernizing; your land impedes progress" (Act II, Line 45). This rhetoric aligns with Weberian bureaucratic rationalization and reflects contemporary state discourse around development projects that displace poor communities (Otieno, 2017).

In *The Floods*, General Bwogo's labeling of dissenters as "terrorists" legitimizes state murder. This manipulation of fear echoes Uganda's more recent crackdowns on opposition figures (Namutebi, 2019), underscoring Althusser's ideological state apparatuses at work. The state is not just repressive-it is dramatical in its terror.

5.2 oppression and Class struggles

In *Inheritance*, Tamina's courtroom defense: "This land is my inheritance"- captures the tension between historical entitlement and modern-state appropriation. It invokes Ngũgĩ's (1986) argument that land is both economic and cultural capital. Her resistance dramatizes how legal systems, inherited from colonial regimes, are used to dispossess rural citizens.

Likewise, *The Floods* presents land and livelihood erosion in the plight of Kyeyune and Nankya. Their poverty reflects the class contradictions of Uganda's neo-patrimonial state (Kamya, 2016). Audience interviews confirm that these characters resonated deeply with rural audiences, particularly subsistence farmers who saw their own

marginalization reflected on stage.

5.3 Resistance and Embodied Repression

Tamina challenges both patriarchal and legal authority. Her monologue interrupts elite narratives and reclaims agency for peasant citizens. As one common civilian audience member (interview, Nairobi, 2024) noted, “She gave voice to people who were never meant to speak in court.”

Nankya in *The Floods* may be less vocal, but her refusal to parrot state propaganda—especially in Scene IV, where she tears the newspaper and cries silently; demonstrates resistance through the body. This aligns with Schechner’s (2003) idea of performance as embodied dissent.

5.4 Dramaturgical Strategies and Symbolism

Both plays utilize symbolism effectively. For instance, land in *Inheritance* carries ancestral, economic and political meanings. These transforms the stage into a contested site of memory and identity. In *The Floods*, for example, water serves as metaphor and structural device. The floods represent moral collapse and potential renewal. Stage directions (“floods incoming”) signal communal crisis and resistance. This shapes audience affect through embodied performance.

These dramaturgical choices underscore the plays’ socio-political critiques and their call for civic engagement.

5.5 Audience Reception and Cultural Impact

Archival media show *Inheritance* sparked extensive debate on land reform in Kenya. Some critics praising its courage and others warning against elite stereotyping. Interviews with older audience members reveal the play’s role in galvanizing grassroots activism.

The Floods faced official censorship, yet clandestine performances by university theater groups sustained its influence underground. Interviews with Ugandan theater practitioners highlight its inspirational role in shaping resistance theater and public consciousness during Amin’s regime.

These data demonstrate plays dialogic function as a site of political contestation and community solidarity.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates how *Inheritance* and *The Floods*, despite distinct contexts, dramatize systemic social injustices: corruption, class struggles, oppression and resistance. Through nuanced dramaturgy and symbolism. Through Social Conflict theory, the plays reveal complex engagement with power, ideology and resistance.

Rich reception data amplify understanding of the plays’ cultural impact. This shows their continuing relevance in debates over corruption, oppression, class struggles and resistance. The balanced gender analysis foregrounds intersectional oppression and agency.

Future research might explore performance histories, contemporary theatrical adaptations and intersectional readings focusing on race, class and gender. These will deepen appreciation of East African plays’ enduring socio-political vitality.

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