

The Aesthetics of Community Theatre and Gender Construction in Selected Post-Apartheid South African Dramas

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Abstract

Gender discourse has always played prominent roles in human society. In the last three decades, discourses on gender inequality have continued to offer different writing engagements to writers across the regions of Africa. The representation of gender disparity is one of the key issues generated in the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. There have been various scholarly engagements across African Literature, but not much has foregrounded the relationship between gender and community theatre as reflected in the dramatic discourse of the Post-apartheid era in South Africa. The apartheid era resuscitated the urge towards the violence against women in the sense that the dehumanization of the male folks had effects on the treatment meted out to women in the homes and even on a larger sphere of existence. The Post-Apartheid era however attempted to re-establish the importance of the women by giving them a voice to authenticate their importance in the society. Generally, in African literature, gender inequality has also been on the forefront of literary discourse. While early male writers have not portrayed women in a seemingly good light, feminist critics have continued also to engage these misrepresentations of women in male authored texts. It is also in this light that female writers also have taken it up to address these patriarchal representations by depicting the women folk in a good light, in the face of socio-political and socio-economic woes bedeviling the African continent.

A number of works have been done on the representation of gender (women, especially), generally in African literature. One of such socio-political cum economic issues is the apartheid regime in South African and its aftermath, tagged as Post-apartheid. The various theatrical experiments have culminated into a strong theatrical/dramatic tradition in South Africa.

The aesthetics of Community theatre and gender reconstruction were thoroughly reflected in the study in order to ascertain their reflection in Post-apartheid South African drama. The changing roles of gender participation in the South African Africa were also examined and analysed through the two selected texts for the study - Brett Bailey's *Ipi Zombi?* and Thulani S. Mtshali's *Weemen*. The two texts were analyzed through the lens of the Feminist-Womanist theory in order to explicate the aesthetics of gender representation in the two selected texts.

The findings of the study revealed that male authors of the post-apartheid era were trying to represent women in a positive dimension as a complement to the female authors who represented themselves and their struggles for acceptance and equality in their works. It was observed that male authors of the post-apartheid era portrayed women as objects of revolt against sexual fantasy that should be dealt with and as such, they are portrayed as victims of domestic violence, a theme reinforced

through the use of language and dramatic techniques. The language and dramatic techniques also point in this direction.

Key words: aesthetics, apartheid, post-apartheid, gender, community theatre.

Background to the Study

Gender related issues have been subject of scholarly discourse for so long in South Africa. There have been both advancements and setbacks over time due to the available exposure of realities that seem to reshape public perceptions and orientations of people. In contemporary times, gender issues have continued to generate serious attention around the globe and most importantly in Post-apartheid South Africa. On the international scene, there have been various declarations about and against the treatment of women in the society. One of such declarations is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 by the United Nations (UN) which serves as the International Bill of Rights for women. In relation to this, the Beijing Conference held in 1995 (The United Nations 1995), the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the African Union Protocol developed in 2003 all foreground the need to have gender related inequities tackled. Consequently, any form of discrimination against women should not be tolerated in the society.

Akala and Divala (2016) opine that “attempted definitions of gender equity have proven problematic because equity is not about providing equal opportunities alone but rather an engagement with the source of disadvantage and dealing with the plight of disadvantaged groups”. Interestingly, the focus of gender discourse should be on how to get to the source of gender problems in the society. Norms and deviations in gender discourse often characterize different debates in academic discourse. Such discourse often focus on domination, differentiation in role assignment and allocation of privileges. (Akala and Divala, 2016)

Simone de Beauvoir’s (1989) assertion that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman is relevant to this discourse in the sense that the inseparable questions of whether gender is a product of nurture or nature are still less classified in the gender discourse. Butler (2004) also reiterates that gender constitutes liveable, the relationship between gender norms and human survival. Butler further argues that nurture and nature play complimentary roles. The genetic predisposition guarantees minimal survival whereas the social attribution intervenes at the onset life; the two establish conditions for a liveable human life.

The private and public spheres have continued to provide an avenue for generationally and culturally entrenched images, laws, values and practices which prescribe the appropriateness of some behaviours and roles for boys and girls. At an early age in life, women are socialized into the normative societal behavior constructions such as seeing women as soft at heart and emotionally reckless beings while men at an early stage of their lives should be seen as strong and as such are not expected to cry, even when they are emotionally down.

In African literature generally, the portrayal of women has become an issue that continues to generate public discourse among different scholars. More recently, scholars have started to veer towards how female authors have represented male characters in their works. Solanke (2013) questions the assumed supremacy of the men folk and as the mouthpiece of God in the traditional setting as exemplified in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*. It is also of note that female authors themselves also portray female characters in certain ways that remain object of criticism among scholars. This trend of discourse is reflected in post-apartheid drama in South Africa.

Graver (1999:14) agrees that post-apartheid South African drama addresses pertinent issues like “marginalization, gender equality, education, poverty, crime and cultural pride which constitute

pressing issues in the wake of apartheid". This is a sharp departure from earlier themes that captured the world's attention with palpable protest against apartheid.

Graver opines that the new South African drama focuses on the social realities of post-apartheid South Africa. These new realities embrace problems of identity, urbanisation, the place of women in post-apartheid South Africa, problem of acceptance and other related problems. These problems manifest in the apartheid and post-apartheid South African plays that are discussed in this paper.

Responding to the immediate challenges and realities of South African drama, Zakes Mda (1995:38) claims that "culture has always played a role both to reinforce these conditions and to challenge them". The products of the culture, most especially the theatre, have responded to these conditions and drama still continues to play a meaningful role in shaping the South African society. In order to effectively achieve this, and truly fulfill such a role, drama must neither ignore nor cling to the past. The reconfiguration of gender relations cannot be overlooked in light of the ongoing discussion over human rights and freedom principles in a newly democratic South Africa. In order to emphasize crucial ways in which women are viewed in this changing culture, a critical analysis of the representation of female characters in notable drama texts is required.

Statement of the Problem

Literature, generally, provides an avenue for exploring the socio-cultural and socio-political issues facing the society. Writers such as Wole Soyinka, Lewis Nkosi, Athol Fugard, among others have continued to interrogate a number of problems facing the African continent. Since the different regions in the continent have some distinct problems facing them, writers from such regions often depict them in their works. The South African writers are not different in this regard. Over the years, they have continued to explore the evils of apartheid and post-apartheid regimes in South Africa. Numerous studies have been conducted to analyze some of these issues in order to provide a direction for the South African society. However, not much has been done on the issues that border on gender and community theatre as reflected in Post-apartheid South African Drama. This study therefore seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Methodology

The data for this study are drawn from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source includes two texts namely Brett Bailey's *Ipi Zombi?* and Thulani S. Mtshali's *Weemen*. The secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles and credible online publications. Kolawole's (1997) theory of Womanism will be engaged in the analysis of the selected texts to explicate the representations in the selected texts.

Significance of the Study

This study enhances the understanding of aesthetics of gender aesthetics and community theatre in Post-apartheid South African Drama. It will also highlight new perspectives on the roles of women in Post-Apartheid South African Drama. Apart from providing more insight into the study of South African Drama, the study will also contribute to the knowledge of how male authors represent women, and how female dramatists assert their voices through their works.

Literature Review

South African drama is an outgrowth and reflection of the society that supports it. It is important to point out that Post-apartheid South African Drama is an offshoot of the realities of the end of Apartheid thus the occasional reference to the Apartheid period. According to Chapman (2003:352), South African drama alternates between "rich" and "poor" settings. His statement that South African play "sought the poor in the township audience; it more often got the rich in the art-going intelligentsia" is accurate. Chapman discusses theater companies like TECON (the Theatre Council of Natal) and PET (the People's Experimental Theatre) that have a history of supporting student action. Drama addresses societal consciousness by employing characters as archetypal representations of the underprivileged. The state's brutal style of rule, its black collaborators in

promoting black awareness, and the organic character of African communal spirit and values, which call for heroism via collective acts of resistance against apartheid, are all presented in this setting.

The apartheid system did everything possible to isolate township from the politically, socially and economically motivated black theatre. Since it was virtually impossible for the blacks to gain access to public venues suitable for staging popular events, they devised a means of dramatically presenting their woes to the watching world in order to gain the sympathy of the people and nations that are receptively sympathetic or empathetic to their call for total liberation from apartheid. This encouraged the development of the “cockroach theatre” with its minimal cast, and its very flexible style of performance and its easy adaptability to all situations.

The Cockroach Theatre model at the initial stage involved plays that were unscripted. These unscripted plays raised questions about political and aesthetic representation that are very germane in the theatrical possibility in South Africa. According to Chapman (2003:355), black theatre is ‘vivid, quick paced, cathartic and individualistic in its reliance on colorful township types’. From the foregoing, we can conclude that ‘black theatre’ portrays the realities of the South African workplace in which exploitation was rife.

The room that ‘black theatre’ gives for inventive portraiture and collective heroism in the crowded existence of the factory-floor life led to what is termed the ‘worker drama’. Worker drama had as its cast, ordinary workers rather than trained actors. Worker drama is usually performed in trade-union halls. It operates in the form of an ordinary worker presenting information about everyday worker life in non-dramatic monologue. By so doing, he characteristically presents the fate of the black South African workers as a group of people symptomatic of the black who needed to be liberated from daily oppression.

The ‘black drama’ and the ‘worker drama’ culminated in what may be termed the ‘Coffin drama’. The ‘Coffin drama’ brought about a theatrical ritual of coffin, a march by the masses from the stadium to the cemetery collectively mourning victim/victims of apartheid brutality and bestiality. The hearse containing the coffin is followed by a multitude on foot, in a procession of wailing and dirge-singing. There is the traditional washing of hands in the house of the buried with buckets of water placed on corners for the vast crowd to wash their hands.

The political context is germane in the discussion of post-apartheid South African drama. This is necessary because the new South Africa is definitely a product of the societal upheavals of the past. The current societal experience is a response to the struggles of apartheid South Africa. Contemporary South African drama has really changed as it has greatly responded to the political and cultural developments of the new order. South African drama now has a new identity that focuses on domestic as well as societal issues. In the area of form and style, the drama still maintains its relationship with traditional African drama with the use of songs and dance. Furthermore, the use of the epistolary technique still manifest in most of the plays, and the audience continue to have a concrete role in the course of performance, by their gestures and comments.

Dramatists have assumed the responsibilities of making for their past omissions by providing the black theatre practitioners with those skills and opportunities that had been earlier on denied them, which will enable them to make their way in the now slightly reformed theatre industry. They however, fail to reeducate themselves, their error lies in the fact that, like so much in South African cultural life, it is not what must be learnt that is important, but what must be unlearned. They need to change their own orientation, and come to terms with the new found freedom and equality. The playwrights need to be familiar with the new terrain, comprehend and understand their new roles, as well as the equality they now enjoy with their former masters. This will assist them in defining their new roles, before they can conveniently educate the masses.

In the post-apartheid plays, it is obvious that the playwright desires to contest the power of the coloniser and assert the authority of the oppressed. These post apartheid plays aim at finding a voice for the voiceless, rather than allowing the authorial voice to be the one dictating the pace. In

most contemporary South African plays, authors see themselves as storytellers who are right in the middle of the story. In the post-apartheid plays, it is obvious that the playwright desires to contest the power of the coloniser and assert the authority of the oppressed. Thus, in most of the new plays, there is a manifestation of “a conscious effort to let others speak, even and especially – when the writer’s own beliefs were most directly challenged” (Jolly and Derek 1998:8).

Characters from different areas of life are brought up to tell their stories and personal experiences as we find in Reza De Wet’s *Crossing* (1994), where each of the characters individually narrates their own story. By offering a mouth-piece for their stories, contemporary South African dramatists directed attention away from the desire to tell their own stories, but allows the characters to tell their own stories themselves. Bret Bailey’s *Ipi Zombi?* (1998) and Ismail Mahomed’s *Cheaper than Roses* (1999) exemplify this fact.

In *Cheaper than Roses*, Betty Farie, the only character, narrates her tale at the train station. She gives an insight into her hopes and aspiration, success and failure, and her acceptance and rejection. This was further supported by Thulani S. Mtshali in *Weemen* (1999) when Tsoarelo narrates her ordeal with her husband. The characters tell their stories themselves. The importance of the marginalised women in post-apartheid South Africa is also highlighted. Such women are trying hard to find their voices through women dramatists like Reza De Wet in some of her plays like *Crossing*. Others include male dramatists like Ismail Mahomed, Thulani S. Mtshali and Bret Bailey who are also championing the liberation of women through their plays.

In the past, South African women were usually presented as sex objects who are always used as means to an end by men. Thulani in *Weemen* exemplifies this in Tsoarelo’s maltreatment by Miltshie her husband. Miltshie in scene one says “...I am the only man here...this mouth says the final word here...you are just like this furniture!”(p.104). Only very few of the women hold significant posts in the society and this is usually among the natives.

It is against this background that, both apartheid and post-apartheid playwrights presented their dramas, as a means of liberating the blacks under the apartheid regime, and also as a way of identifying the social problems and social realities of post-apartheid. Also, the Community theatre style adopted by the post-apartheid playwrights encourages participation, through comments and contributions, from the audience in the course of performance. As a result, solutions to some of the challenges and problems are provided during such performances.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Feminist-Womanist gender theory. The philosophical movement known as feminism aims to eradicate the marginalization and oppression of women in society. Women's fight to assert their rights in society gave rise to feminism. When women in Europe and America realized they were being mistreated because of their sex and took action to end it in the 18th century, feminism began to grow. In the modern day, feminism has spread to several regions of the world. However, individuals refer to it by different names depending on how well it fits into their particular cultural context.

Feminism has its root in the Latin word “Femina” which is used to denote women’s issue. From the above definition of feminism, it is clear that feminism means different things to different people. Sotunsa (2009) observes that “feminism is concerned with females not just as a biological category, but the female gender as a social category”, and therefore, feminists share the view that women’s oppression is tied to their sexuality. This is so because women and men’s biological differences are reflected in the organisation of the society, and based on these differences, women are treated as inferior to men. Feminism as a social movement and a theoretical approach focuses on issues related to women’s oppression and marginalisation with a view to finding lasting solutions to the problems identified.

It is pertinent to discuss womanism as an African variant of feminism because the above discussion only examines womanism in the context of its origin as an African-American variant. Womanism in the African context differs from how it is presented by Alice Walker (1983) and other African American scholars.

Womanism is relevant to the experiences of Black women all around the world. Sotunsa rightly observes that “womanism is a global ideology that defines the experiences of Blacks in the Diaspora as well as those residing in Africa”, however, the term Black is elastic because some critics have applied the term to mean all those people who are non-white by descent.

The study explores Kolawole (1997)’s theory on womanism. When Kolawole states that "To Africans, womanism is the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways," she is defining womanism in the African context. Family is a central issue in womanist discourse. Womanism supports the communal state of the African world. One of the assumptions of Womanism is that a womanist is a mother. Mother in this sense does not necessarily mean the mother of her children alone, but also a mother of a race, nation and the whole earth. Olaluwoye (2005) notes that “to an extent, the role of a mother is spiritual”. The role of a mother cannot be underestimated especially when things go wrong in the home. Women also serve as peace makers in the home, community and the nation at large.

This study acknowledges the communal and ideological positions of African womanists, but it contends that their notion of Womanism and its agenda do not represent the interest of diverse categories of women in Africa. This is because women in Africa and their interests are multiple and contradictory. By claiming to be setting the agenda for women in Africa, the African womanists, like their foreign counter-parts, suppress the voices of “other women” whose interests, hope and aspirations are different from those of African womanists. In spite of their claim to collaborate with men, African womanists, like their foreign counter-parts, are also interested in contestation of power with men. Thus, African womanists and their transformation agenda are elitist because they constitute a kind of hegemony in the network of power and identity formation.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine the aesthetics of gender and community theatre in two selected Post-Apartheid South African drama texts. To achieve this aim, the study considers the following objectives:

- i. identify the aesthetics of gender and community theatre in Post-Apartheid South African drama
- ii. examine the dramatic techniques employed in the representation of gender and Community Theatre in Post-apartheid South African Drama.
- iii. examine the representation of gender and community theatre in the selected texts through the lens of the Feminist-Womanist theory

Research Questions

- i. What are the aesthetics of gender and community theatre in Post-Apartheid South African drama?
- ii. How has the dramatic techniques employed interrogate the representation of gender and Community Theatre in Post-Apartheid South African Drama?
- ii. What are the representations of gender in the selected texts in relation to the tenets of the Feminist-Womanist theory?

Analysis

Brett Bailey's *Ipi Zombi?*: A Call to The Society's Sense of Reasoning

Ipi Zombi? is a product of Community Theatre which projects the happenings within the Kokstad community in South Africa. It challenges people to deep thinking and action because of their deep religious beliefs and superstition. The drama title is translated as "Where Are the Zombies?" Zombie refers to the supernatural power that, according to voodoo belief, may enter into and reanimate a dead body. It could also mean a dead person who is able to move because of magic, thus the 'Zombi' in this play refer to the witches. The pattern of action in the drama resembles a folk-tale session and the characters and the audience seem to be sharing common knowledge and aspirations. After completing his University education, Bailey began experimenting with street performances and community theatre projects in Cape Province. He later ventured into studying Xhosa culture with traditional elders. He established a theatre school in Grahams Town and, with the experience earlier gained, he started "creating several plays that combine performance elements from 'sangoma' rituals with other forms of experimental theatre to create highly original and unique forms of theatre" (Graver, 1999:200).

Ipi Zombi? developed from Bailey's investigation into the outbreak of witchcraft hysteria in Kokstad community in South Africa. Twelve boys were killed in an accident and rumours began to spread that witches caused the crash and enslaved the souls of the twelve boys. The story caused a lot of division in the community and many innocent people were murdered. The community was split along religious lines; between the Christians and the traditionalists. However, there were other underlying issues that this crisis revealed. These issues are highlighted in the play. The crisis includes the boys who were killed by the witches in an accident. Thus, the Christian community was twice disturbed from burying the boys. The zeal with which the comrades disturbed the burial was a response to their own disempowerment by politicians who discourage them from direct political actions in a bid to achieve certain goals. The tension in the community, however, remained unresolved.

In dramatising this story, Bailey presents characters who are also musicians – this is an attempt to drive home his message and to involve all interest groups in the performance as a means of true reconciliation. Furthermore, the issues raised in the play affect the lives of the performers and the audience directly. Therefore, songs, most of the time, effectively establish the mood of the play. Bailey explores this and uses it to heighten the mood and excitement of the play. Also, the use of songs and music in *Ipi Zombi?* identifies the play as an African drama. Bailey replaces the actions of individuals with the actions of a large group of singers and dancers in order to fully explore the practices of community drama. He infuses his drama with ritual elements that involve the audience in a kind of sacrosanct religious ceremony, rather than a detached outsider watching the play for entertainment sake. Thus, the message of the play is well taken.

The play deals with the fear of witchcraft which happens in the Kokstad community where the play developed. A specific scene from *Ipi Zombi?* that captures fear is the procession and funeral scene, where the community confronts the trauma of the twelve boys' deaths and the resulting hysteria around witchcraft. In this significant moment, songs of mourning blend with ritual drumming and incantations as the community gathers to bury the boys. However, tension builds as certain community members, especially youth vigilantes and churchgoers; begin to interrupt the ceremony, accusing local women (mostly elderly or socially marginalised) of witchcraft and blaming them for the deaths:

SENTI: [*Imploring*] People, listen to me. This is not true. The spirits of our brothers are not alive and in Heaven. Their spirits were stolen before they could even reach Heaven. Stolen and made into slaves by our mothers. Stolen and locked up in the dark (Graver, 1999:212).

This is a practical and prominent issue, most especially in a situation where poverty permeates the society. The society is not economically buoyant. This is obvious from the scenic descriptions, the character traits and mode of dressing of the actors. In such a situation, any incident emanating from the community is always linked to the existence of the witches there. Such incident usually results in violence against the suspected witches in the community who unfortunately are generally the women, as seen in *Ipi Zombi*? Lack of strong adult authoritative figures, such as respected elders or revered religious leaders in the community, the legacy of high school age activists in the anti-apartheid movement and the unresolved grief over the loss of the boys create a volatile environment for the crisis.

From the description of the stage performance of the play, it was gathered that Bailey involved sixty local residents, including six 'sangomas' and a church choir, in its performance and this makes the performance highly indigenous. Bailey's experimental theatre challenges traditional didacticism by emphasizing collective action over individual moral choices within particular social situations by mixing elements of community theatre, in which the actions of large groups of people replace the actions of individuals and in which actors represent their own lives rather than the abstracted and exemplary lives of imagined characters.

In *Ipi Zombi*?, Bailey creates spectacles of colour, movement and sound to excite the audience and he throws in moral and realistic elements that make them ill at ease with its passive, privilege position as involved observers. This reminds us of Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect on the audience. Brecht infuses the theatre with ritual elements that make it, sometimes, a scene of a sanctified refuge from the violent outside world and, sometimes, a scene of dangerous possessions, in which the violence outside reaches a disturbing spiritual concentration.

Mda (1999) in the preface to the play opines that "the play, as a whole, has a dreamlike structure of condensed and contradictory impulses that illuminate the complexities of both township life and the strange cultural practice called theatre". All these constitute the highlight of the drama. This way, the importance of oneness on the part of the community is established. The government is criticized for negligence. It is also criticized for lack of befitting jobs among the youths and absence of basic amenities in the community. Rather than indulging in moral cum religious uprightness, Bailey expresses his disturbance and disappointment over the murder of innocent women. He also seeks to explain the circumstance that gives rise to violence rather than condemning the act. He shows how terrible fears, unfounded suspicion and bereavement can lead to evil forces in the society.

Ipi Zombi? highlights the consequences of problems faced by rural community dwellers. The unregulated and overworked taxi services often put people's lives at risk. The Law enforcement agencies in such communities often develop a care free attitude towards issues and pressing problems after the end of apartheid, thus, teenage vigilante groups take laws into their hands and persecute innocent citizens in the name of spiritual purification of the society. Bailey also encourages the audience to see how social pressure leads to violence, and to see that the brutality of such violent behaviour in the community does not help in solving the community's problems. Thus, Bailey does not allow any of his characters to serve as a moral compass for the audience. In a nutshell, the audience is educated on how to understand and confront approaching danger.

Thulani S. Mtshali's Women in Weemen

Weemen portrays the social as well as personal conditions of abuse and a woman's attempt to free herself from her abuser. The play centers on a domestic scuffle between Mlitshe and his wife, Tsoarelo. The husband is a tyrant who always abuses and molests his wife, with a threat to hack her down with an axe, at the slightest provocation. Mlitshe treats his wife as a slave. Tsoarelo starts a little business, secretly, as a way of providing for the upkeep of her children, since her tyrannical husband does not provide money for the upkeep of the family.

Situation changes, negatively, for Mlitshe when he loses his job, due to his carelessness. He becomes a shadow of himself and has to consult the oracle in order to find solutions to his problems. Unfortunately for Mlitshe, he loses control of his home and family, as Tsoarelo takes control of her life and is now doing well in her business. Mlitshe sobers up and pretends to be born-again in order to gain the trust and affection of his wife but he steals her money, secretly, and challenges her aggressively, when he notices that she is making more money than him.

She ignores her husband's ranting and concentrates on her work. She later abandons him to sleep overnight on a chair. In the final scene, Mlitshe comes home drunk, with his friend, and encourages the friend to keep the night in his house. He orders his wife to get out of the bed, to cook for him and his friend, but he meets his Waterloo. The scene is portrayed thus:

MLITSHE: Wake up and make food, woman!

(She tries to go back to sleep, but he pulls the blankets off her trying to beat her, but she pulls the blanket and he falls and she jumps on him, beating him with fists.)

MLITSHE: Wenzani? Uyazimbambela? *(He tries to advance but he is overpowered.)*

TSOARELO: Do you get me?...I am tired...of you *(She beats him harder and sits on him)* (Perkins, 1998:109).

Tsoarelo does not only beat him up, she chases him and his friend out of the house - this time, for good. The husband comes around to plead the following morning and promises allegiance and humility to her. This "role reversal" or "upside-down" gender order signifies the fact that the modern South African women should be more determined in establishing themselves on the public scene, by fending for themselves rather than being tools or 'second class citizens' to the males in the society.

Mtshali uses the interaction of three actors, representing five characters, to focus on the shifting of social roles they represent and, thus, draws the audience's attention to the analysis and the moral lessons of this interaction. Not only is the play a perfect example of a cockroach theatre, with its minimal cast, the stage setting is also sparse, which highlights the poor theatre tradition. The dexterity of the actress and her ability to make use of the space, the set and sparse props effectively, comes to play.

The set consists of a shack made of zinc and it serves a dual purpose of the kitchen as well as the bedroom. "*A shack made of zinc, one room which is kitchen cum bedroom. A bed on one side, a rail to hang clothes; A cupboard with some cups, plates, etc. A table on the side cum cupboard, always covered with a plastic cloth, wherein there's popcorn...*" (p.104). Though a domestic drama that centers on the family, it indirectly addresses the national issue of poverty. Besides, it goes on to ridicule the post-apartheid South Africa where the blacks are ruling, but the political power and economy is still majorly in the hands of the whites.

Weemen represents violence only indirectly. The action of the play portrays the conventions of melodrama: Mlitshe chases his wife with an axe, which she later seizes when she contemplates killing him as he lies in a drunken stupor. The significance of the drama emerges more forcefully in the clash between her attempt to earn a living, selling sweets to local children, and her husband's attempt to thwart her, first by stealing her money and, later, as a born again Christian who manipulates her sense of duty. The conflict between husband and wife is further complicated not only by the pretended performance of their changing roles, but also by the violence and oppression in the play. He is caught in-between a better educated female boss and an assertive authoritarian "*Sangoma*", a traditional soothsayer cum herbalist that Mlitshe approaches to help him re-establish his control on his wife and his boss. All the moves by Mlitshe show that his various challenges expose his bad fate.

By downplaying the spectacle of suffering in favour of the demonstration of different forms of abuse and resistance, *Weemen* excites laughter which the African audience has often exhibited in responses to acts of physical fights, though mimed, between husband and wife. In the course of a performance of the play, members of the audience, especially women might be tempted to offer comments, in form of advice, to the woman in the play, urging her to leave the man since it appears that he will never change. In this way, they are comparing the stage situation with others of their acquaintance. This demonstrates the audience appreciation of the actor's skills in dramatising this situation and a keen appreciation of the social issue at stake on the stage that represents the large society.

The husband's behaviour itself stems from the accumulated frustration of rejection in the society. His loss of job, subjection to oppression under a woman at his place of work, his state of constant drunkenness as a way of covering up for his unfortunate situation - all culminate in his transferred aggression on his wife. Thus, to be worthy of his wife and to measure up, he devises various tricks to make extra money with which he attempts to assert himself as a man and husband in his own home.

Conclusion

The aesthetics of community theatre in South African drama remain a defining feature of the post-apartheid era as drama serves the dual function of mirroring lived realities and being a tool for social critique and transformation. *Ipi Zombi?* and *Weemen*, as examined in this study, touch on the enduring socio-political struggles faced by many South Africans, particularly the marginalised, the poor, and women; highlighting issues such as spiritual paranoia, domestic violence, gender inequality, and economic disempowerment. These plays do more than dramatize post-apartheid disillusionment; they offer spaces for collective reflection and healing through ritual, performance, and dialogue. Importantly, both works reflect the resilience and agency of communities and individuals navigating systems of structural inequality, thereby resonating with ongoing debates about gender justice, cultural identity, and communal survival in contemporary South Africa. Beyond their national context, the plays also add to the global discourses on theatre as a means of postcolonial resistance and gender emancipation. By employing minimalist staging, oral traditions, and participatory aesthetics, they challenge Western theatrical conventions and affirm the relevance of African performance traditions in embodying postcolonial identities. Thus, gender and community theatre, as reflected in these texts, remain critical to contemporary issues in South African drama and to the global conversation on how theatre can confront oppression, reclaim voice, and re-define identity.

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