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Contradiction of Action and Inaction: A Reading of Selected Absurd Mini-Narratives in Ruganda's Plays

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Abstract
This article focuses on the absurd mini-narratives in John Ruganda's three plays—*The Burdens* (1972), *Black Mamba* (1973) and *Shreds of Tenderness* (2001)—whose intertwining struggles communicate the desire for progress among the characters even as reality consigns them to regression. This article argues that the progress or regression in the three plays stems from omissions and commissions because the actions and inactions of the characters in the three plays determine their destinies. Sharp contrasts/paradoxes/absurdities stare with precision in the faces of the main characters whose embrace of Eurocentric cultures such as monogamy and capitalism have made them fail to coexist. Jean-Francois Leotard's postmodernist theoretical ideas of mini-narratives are key here to unravelling this glaring paradox. Lyotard theorised that 'Grand Narratives' of progress and human perfectability are no longer tenable, and the best we can hope for is a series of 'mini-narratives', which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances. This article contends that the strivings of the characters in the selected plays under review come to naught, thus the absurd reality inherent in the condition of the characters. This article thus surmises that art and reality are conjoined twins in the selected plays and the characters' actions enable this researcher to make a commentary on the human condition.

Keywords:
Absurd, mini-narratives, Ruganda plays, contradictions, East Africa Region
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Introduction

This article conducts a postmodernist analysis of John Ruganda's *The Burdens* (1972), *Black Mamba* (1973) and *Shreds of Tenderness* (2001) in relationship to the absurd realities that accompany the characters' actions and inactions. Ruganda is, arguably, East Africa's foremost playwright. He is respected both as a leading dramatist and a celebrated critic as demonstrated by his works: *The Burdens* (1972), *Covenant with Death* (1973), *Black Mamba* (1973), *The Floods* (1980), *Music Without Tears* (1982), *Echoes of Silence* (1986), and *Shreds of Tenderness* (2001), all of which attest to his being a writer of genius and a social critic. The choice of three plays out of his oeuvre was informed by their having copious overt mini-narratives (as defined in the next sub-section) for analysis in this article to contribute towards literary criticism of plays from the Eastern Africa region from a postmodernist lens.

Being one of the foremost playwrights, dramatists, and literary scholars to have emerged from the Eastern Africa region, Ruganda has thoroughly taught and entertained the region. A respected playwright from the East Africa region, Ruganda tailors his works in a manner that captures experiences of the region's peoples. Thematic expressions include the challenges of poverty, betrayal, primitive acquisitiveness, political dictatorship, and violence still linger large in the entire region, making Ruganda, echoing May's (2006) timeless observation about Ibsen (from the Scandinavia), a dramatist 'living at the end of history' for writing works that express problems that arise for humanity *ad infinitum*. This is equally true to Ruganda whose works express the eternal problems with which the people of the East African region grapple.

Background criticism

Ruganda's works have attracted a lot of interest from scholars in the region and beyond. Analysing what he designated Ruganda's female plays *The Floods* (1980), *The Burdens* (1972) and *Black Mamba* (1988), Wasike (2009) portrayed a gender figuration of Ruganda's female characters as social metaphors of the Uganda nation. Wasike commented on the ironic relationship between the all-powerful male characters and the seemingly

subjugated female characters in Ruganda's plays. Wasike concluded that female characters bore the brunt brutality of masculine power. This article partially disagrees with Wasike's observation because in *The Burdens*, Tinka appears to have vanquished her male antagonist, Wamala, by stabbing him to death. This points to the ultimate defeat of masculinity and what it represents in *The Burdens*, a gap that this article seeks to fill. This defeat of masculinity could also be observed in *Black Mamba* where Berewa and Prof. Coarx are defeated by Namuddu who sabotages their apparently weird plans to use her, as a source of lucre and carnal fulfillment, respectively. This absurdity has been brought out more clearly in the analysis section, to show how the gap Wasike had not analysed is filled. In *The Floods*, Nankya is intrepid enough to tell Bwogo the truth about her African ethnic and cultural heritage as well as her readiness to face the firing-squad, unmindful of the consequences of her upfrontness. This resistance is emblematic of the courage the weak have to stand up against the mighty. This article thus treats what happens in the three plays as a revolutionary overthrow of masculine power, which symbolises oppressive dictatorial regime power. It is a symbolic portrayal of the turning of tables, how courage can overthrow even the mightiest of oppressors.

Besides Wasike, Sambai (2008) asserted that leaders expose the people to violence instead of protecting them and concludes that violence is the tool the state uses to control its people. She argued that the common people are vulnerable because of 'the fear instilled in them by the brutal state and the fact that the common man lacks a representative (Sambai, 2008, p.73). This article agrees with Sambai's and Wasike's take and adds that this violence is resisted in the works, albeit in a subtle and hidden form. The resolutions of the selected plays, or lack of them thereof, tend to give hope to the subjugated populations (represented by the suppressed and repressed characters in the selected plays). This article has commented on these resolutions, in later sections of the analysis.

Equally, Kasigwa (2013) used death to refer to the violence in Ruganda's plays. He argued that Ruganda used the theme of death as a running motif in his drama in which he treats the ambivalence of life and death. He also contended that, sometimes, the fear of death explains the meaning and need for the preservation of life. Wasike, Sambai and Kasigwa thus agreed that

Ruganda's plays *The Floods*, *The Burdens* and *Black Mamba* are marked by violent and condescending characters who are emblematic of the political wheeler-dealers in the region. This article further comments on the absurdity of violence and condescension, thus filling a vital gap. On *Black Mamba*, Maduagwu (2013) contended that the personalities of the male characters in Ruganda's *Black Mamba* are informed by their masculine egos. He contemplated that these egos are associated with social forces that regard men more highly on the basis of being male, almost always in a better economic status and having better education as compared to women characters in this play. Thusly, politics and masculinity converge to determine the actions of the characters in these works. Male figures represent powerful politicians whereas female figures represent the exploited, suppressed and repressed population, both men and women. Even though Maduagwu has correctly interpreted the power dynamics in *Black Mamba*, he at the same time left out a vital gap—that power is transient and that, unless it benefits the population, it becomes an absurd abstraction whose allure ends up in absurdity.

Lyotard's postmodernist theoretical ideas of mini-narratives

To understand one of the main arguments in postmodernist literary theory, a reading of Jean-Francois Lyotard is inescapable. Lyotard is certainly central in literary postmodernism (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 1997). Selden's, Widdowson's and Brooker's observation was corroborated by Barry who contended:

> For Lyotard, the Enlightenment whose project Habermas wishes to continue is simply one of the would-be authoritative 'overarching', 'totalising' explanations of things – like Christianity, Marxism, or the myth of scientific progress. These 'metanarratives' ['super-narratives'], which purport to explain and reassure, are really illusions, fostered to smother difference, opposition, and plurality. Hence Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism, that it is, simply, 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. Lyotard theorised that 'Grand Narratives' of progress and human perfectability, then, are no longer tenable, and the best we

> can hope for is a series of 'mini-narratives', which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances. Postmodernity thus 'deconstructs' the basic aim of the Enlightenment, that is 'the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject' (Barry, 2002, p. 64).

The inference here is thus that modern societies create types marked as order or disorder in an attempt to construct socially-solid/cohesive groups. In her timeless observations on postmodernism, Klages (2007) postulated that Francois Lyotard equated that stability with the idea of "totality," or a totalised system. Totality, and stability, and order, Lyotard argued, are maintained in modern societies through the means of "grand narratives" or "master narratives" which are stories a culture tells itself about its practices and beliefs. Commenting on Lyotard's theorisation, Klages explained that a "grand narrative" in American culture might be the story that democracy is the most enlightened (rational) form of government, and that democracy can and will lead to universal human happiness. She argued that every belief system or ideology has its grand narratives. This article concurs with Klage's comment on Lyotard's rationalisation.

Lyotard's questioning of the appropriateness of grand narratives remains largely valid and relevant. This article argues that American democracy, for instance, has drastically failed. In 2024, the president of the United States, Joe Biden, continues to supply the prime minister of Israel with weapons which Benjamin Netanyahu uses to bomb the Gaza Strip into smithereens regardless of protests by American voters in various cities of the United States. These massive anti-genocide protests have also occurred in France, Germany, England, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Finland and many other parts of the EU. Despite this reality, the so-called West continues to support the ferocious and inhumane onslaught in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem by the Israeli occupation forces. Democracy cannot therefore be universally acceptable since its effects, as observed through Western hegemony, are not aimed at sustaining human existence throughout the world. Lyotard also contended that for Marxism, for instance, the "grand narrative" is the idea that capitalism will collapse in on itself and a utopian socialist world will evolve. To that end, this article

argues that capitalism seems to be spreading its tentacles throughout the world while socialist practices thrive alongside capitalism. None is, thus, exclusive of the other. This combination is observable in all modern capitalist nations.

The provisionality, contingency, temporariness, and relativity of mini-narratives as suggested by Lyotard, thus, define the world of texts. Texts function as microcosms rather than bearers of universal meanings and practices. This article will thus regard the various mini-narratives in the selected plays by Ruganda as complete in themselves rather than being a part of a greater universe. The four items highlighted above, which are derived from Lyotard's postmodernist theory of mini narratives, are thus handy in the subsequent analysis.

Convergence of mini-narratives and absurdity of the human condition

This article straightaway delves, albeit briefly, into the various mini-narratives inherent in the selected plays in order to help this critic make a commentary on the realities both fictional and real characters grapple with in contemporary East Africa region. This article has particularly picked these narratives because the texts are richest in them. These narratives demonstrate the absurdity of the human condition as speculated by existential thinkers such as Camus and Sartre who thought and wrote that a human being is an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe that is devoid of truth, value or meaning. They also agreed that humans are in a fruitless search for purpose and significance; and that human existence is both anguished and absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus (1942) observes:

> In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (p. 13)

This statement is a close reflection of the absurd pursuits exhibited by various *dramatis personae* of the selected plays. The characters' grasping mannerisms invariably result in nothing, making their pursuits purposeless, valueless and meaningless. Perhaps, the dramas send a

warning signal to people of the East African region: Like life itself, monetary and material pursuits have limits, in time and space.

To justify the foregoing explanation, for instance, this article observes that Wamala and Tinka in *The Burdens* certainly run afoul of their own commitments. Even though Wamala fails to provide for his family in spite of promise after another to that effect, Tinka appears to be the tinderbox that brings the entire household down because of her persistent attempts at earning the children's love and affection. Her actions aim to stir intense hatred in the youngsters for their father. Acting devoid of hindsight, these two create a logically defeatist system of adults relating as husband and wife and at the same time raising children in a logically incongruent manner. The children will, thus, to borrow from motivational writer Brian Tracy (2002), fall short of the glory of self-esteem. It is absurd that Tinka treats her actions as sacred and Wamala's as profane. The tragedy that Tinka's reckless words and deeds ultimately culminate in leaves the children partially orphaned and consigned to an asylum because their mother must be headed for jail for killing their father. This absurd culmination of parents' decisions on their children is relatable in contemporary East Africa.

Postmodernism, as noted earlier, rejects the idea of 'grand narratives' and instead favours 'mini-narratives' that explain small practices, local events, as opposed to large-scale universal or global concepts. Ruganda does indeed embed *The Burdens*' main narrative about Wamala's fall from significance to ignominy and the attendant conflicts that the family has had to grapple with in the wake of their consignment to indigence, with multiple 'mini-narratives' that make the work grip the attention of the audience and/or reader to the end. The mini-narratives are direct as well as indirect. The direct ones are narrated as anecdotes while the indirect ones are derived from actions various characters exhibit. Equally so are the various mini-narratives derived from the actions of the characters in *Black Mamba* and *Shreds of Tenderness*. What various revelations realised in this article can be summarised by the words of French psychoanalyst Sidney Jourard and those of Norwegian existentialist thinker Søren Kierkegaard:

> Things are seldom what they seem,
> Skim milk masquerades as cream.

> Externals don't display insides,
> Jekylls may be masquerading Hydes.
> (Jourard, 1971)

> I can't be bothered. I can't be bothered to ride; the emotion is too violent; I can't be bothered to walk, it's strenuous; I can't be bothered to lie down, for either I'd have to stay lying down and that I can't be bothered with. Or I'd have to get up again, and I can't be bothered with that either. In short: I just can't be bothered.
>
> (Kierkegaard, 1843)

These two quotations hint strongly at the absurd possibilities this analysis would realise: The characters' pursuit of pleasure result in insufferable misery and despair!

Absurd realisation of mini-narratives in *The Burdens*

Ruganda's play, *The Burdens*, has been widely read and enacted on stage in the East Africa region. It has even become more popular because secondary schools and colleges often prescribe it to the students of literature as a reading text. Perhaps its popularity emanates from the fact that it portrays characters and tragedies that majority of the population could associate with. Tampering tragedy with comedy, especially by use of Wamala's witticism and Kaija's creativity in a bid to survive in a world that seems so wild to a youngster crystallises itself in the hearts of the audience. Without further ado, the anecdote of Nyakake's urinating in bed (pp.1-3) is a constant irritant to Kaija. Kaija whines about it till his father finally brings him a bed (the first mini-narrative) which he does not have the opportunity to sleep in. This mini-narrative not only underscores the biting poverty the former minister's family has had to grapple with but also helps the critic speculate about the possible trajectory the sacked minister's life would assume. Mitterrand (2007) once said, "Nothing is won forever in human affairs, but everything is always possible." The human condition here,

concurs with Lincoln's (2021) observation: "I am not concerned that you have fallen: I am concerned that you arise." This rising from failure is perhaps one of Mitterrand's possibilities. But why does Wamala not rise from failure? Is there a way one can use this as a microcosm of contemporary East Africa, nay, Africa, an evidently richly endowed continent that apparently appears impoverished in most areas of life? Wamala has been a political supremo and yet his children lack basic provisions, reason? How come his powerful position did not give him long-term financial security? This mini-narrative thus not only reveals his family's suffering but affirms Lyotard's view that the human condition is provisional and temporary.

A keen look at Tinka's antics partially hints at why Wamala fails to rise up once again as a man. She, for instance, tells Kaija that his father would be back after around three hours when Kaija wonders whether his father was back (p.1). She then asks Kaija to take his father's share of beans and potatoes explaining that Wamala knew how to take care of himself and that Kaija should not be worried. Tinka proceeds to incite Kaija against his father when she says that he (Kaija) did not have a lot of other things besides lacking a bed (p.3). If one were to comment on Tinka's negativity, they would be forgiven for seeing her as a family wrecker. Her actions do not only build disrespect for and mistrust of Wamala by his children but also push him deeper into depression, prompting him to start nursing the bottle more firmly than he does his family. Wamala thus sarcastically turns his hidden anger on Tinka when he retorts: "Have a sip or two. It helps. Drugs one and keeps one hoping. And the politicians know it. Drink will be the last thing to ban in this country. Come on Tinka, have a glass" (p.37).

Having been a politician himself, Wamala seems to make an important revelation concerning the absurd realities citizens are grappling with (read Ugandan and East African). Its price also hints at the arrested economic situation the characters have had to contend with. Viewed from an absurdist perspective, Tinka appears to be behaving like an aide who undermines their boss only to turn around and blame the same boss for failed administration. Contemporary East Africa region also boasts of such absurd political and religious competitions that ultimately ruin entire nations. Political and religious operatives often lie about development

indexes that never see the light of day just like Tinka's absurd way of raising her children hits the rocks as is seen in the analysis on the third mini-narrative. Such lies are short-lived, a confirmation of Lyotard's speculation about the temporariness of mini-narratives.

The second mini-narrative in *The Burdens* is that of *kondos* (thieves) narrated by Tinka to Kaija (p.4) in which the two *kondos* snatch a suitcase from a girl in high heels and sunglasses only to find that it has the cold corpse of an infant. The girl, having explained to the crowd that she is taking the corpse to its father who works as a salesman in some oil company, attracts the crowd's fury prompting the immediate lynching of the two *kondos*. This is so far the most curiosity-arousing mini-narrative in the play as it reminds the audience of the many related cases of 'lynch law' applicable in East Africa. Whereas the kondos can represent citizens who reap from whence they never sowed, and these abound in a region where corruption appears to be venerated, the lynch crowd represents the ironic reaction of the population. The crowd moves quickly to lynch these seemingly powerless *kondos* not because they are thieves but also because they attempt to steal what is sacrosanct.

Ignorant of what lay in the suitcase they have just snatched, the kondos can disturb the supposed harmony between the body and its spirit as symbolised by the people's meticulous application of burial rites. Reverence for nature requires the deceased to be united with the soil for renewal and continuity to materialise. These rituals create a link between the spirit of the dead and their clansmen (Ocholla-ayayo, 1989) under the African belief system. Renewal here being the people's belief that the dead and the living are mutually tied by death in that transitional continuum. This article argues that what the BIG *kondos* in the political league in parts of contemporary East Africa loot is equally sacrosanct and, thus, ought to animate the masses into region-wide uprisings against looting of public coffers.

On the other hand, this article argues that the real *kondos* who populate the public space rarely expose themselves to lynch crowds because of their systematic nature of operation. This could therefore be read as SMALL kondos being precisely dealt with while the REAL destructive gigantic

kondos whose actions bring down entire regional economies remain unpunished. These *kondos* function in sharp contrast to Odie in *Shreds of Tenderness*, who is an affluent fellow that uses newspaper advertisements to lie to the public that his brother Wak is dead so he would solely inherit his father's immense wealth (p.21). He thus avoids being lynched by the public who probably are not privy to his well-calculated action. How different is this absurd avarice from the avarice that tribalistic and avaricious politicians, and men and women of the cloth and their cronies in the region have exhibited and continue to exhibit? A brief reading of recorded history on Kenya's and Uganda's political developments right from the 1960s to the present day will corroborate this. These politicians, like Odie, operate almost always, within the law but are their actions just?

The citizens in the mini-narrative on *kondos* can equally be compared to Odiambo in *Black Mamba*. Whereas the citizens lynch the *kondos* in *The Burdens*, Odiambo attempts 'to lynch' Prof. Coarx claiming he is engaging in sexual deviance. Prof. Coarx himself calls this a crime of moral turpitude while warning Namuddu against revealing his affair with her to anyone else. He insists that should he be accused of moral turpitude, he would be deported from the fictitious contemporary East African country. Prof. Coarx is emblematic of Western hegemony whereby Sub-Saharan African leaders literally mortgage their people for a morsel of lucre from the West via the IMF, the World Bank and many other bilateral and multilateral fiscal arrangements. Prof. Coarx's arrangement with Berewa to have him enjoy a carnal liaison with Namuddu, Berewa's wife, is thus symbolic of African leaders allowing Westerners to exploit African natural resources. Morality thus becomes provisional and contingent as Lyotard has theorised, a coin to be tossed around at will, a fact postmodernism acknowledges for everything is as indeterminate as it is absurd here.

Third, as Kaija recollects with nostalgia the wonderful times he had had with his grandfather, his mother contradicts him by saying that men are mean, and that it was Kaija's grandmother who was kind, loving and generous. She continues:

> She was wonderful to me. I'd sit by her side listening to her sweet voice telling me stories of old: of drunken men stabbed to death by their jealous wives in the dead of the night; of loving fathers

> reciting heroic poems to their sons; of little children singing themselves to sleep on their mothers' laps. I used to listen to her night after night, till sleep would steal on me' (*The Burdens*, 1972, pp.10-11).

A seemingly powerful rendering of the deep-seated hate that Tinka has for men, this mini-narrative reveals the unconscious desire she hankers about stabbing her husband to death, which she later does and relates to Kaija and Nyakake indirectly before the police arrive to take her away, slightly before curtains fall on *Act III*.

Women killing their husbands and vice-versa due to conflicts in their relationships that turn violent are not uncommon in postmodernism for we are talking of a world without end, a world full of absurdities. She is continually questioning the role of her husband as a family man, and in the power calculations they use to try and earn the approval of their children, Wamala appears more cerebral in 'scoring points' which makes Tinka, in her moment of rage, commit murder (p.73). Does this jealous and reckless action better her condition? What about the condition of her children? Wamala seems to represent the supposedly powerful gender, the male-folk, thus the powerful class that populates government top hierarchy in largely patriarchal contemporary East Africa region. This observation echoes Wasike's (see a brief review of literature above) who asserts that Ruganda's powerful male characters symbolise the ruling class in the East Africa region while the weak female characters symbolise the subjugated masses in the region. Tinka's narrative is, thus, emblematic of the conflict between the two classes, the governing and the governed. Her apparent win symbolises the temporary overthrow of the ruling elites by the *hoi polloi* but the police coming for her (pp. 80-81) means they have clamped down the revolt. Absurdly thus, both the male and the female characters fail, rendering their power contingent, nay relative as Lyotard had speculated. Their children, as earlier pointed out at the end of the first mini-narrative, are left behind, fatherless and motherless, meaning they will probably be consigned to an asylum.

Subsequently, there is this heartrending story of love. Tinka is full of reminiscence of her childhood when everything appeared perfect. She tells

Kaija the story about the palace, and Ngoma, the Paramount Chief. She relates how the eight-five-year-old father of Nyenje (for Nyenje was his only child, a beautiful lass) had sent word around that whoever wanted to marry his daughter had to prove his prowess by climbing a very tall tree and bringing down, in one piece, the gourd containing her umbilical cord. The narrative continues that chiefs and princes, hunters and herdsmen, tried their luck without success for the *mvule* tree was very tall. Then came a leper, the man who stank with leprosy and destitution. The miserable leper, ridiculed and scorned, climbed the giant *mvule* and brought down the gourd. The fair chief had given him a chance.

Postmodernism alters the order of things in society, be it power, authority, or other. The leper's feat is indicative of the postmodernist love for reversal of order, unpredictability, provisionality and individuality. This interpretation is mindful of Lyotard's take that mini-narratives remind the reader of the temporariness and relativeness of reality, so unlike what grand-narratives presume. Society, for instance, laughs at the leper, refusing to take him seriously for that could go against the order of things. However, in postmodernism everything is possible (including chiefs and princes losing a beautiful lass to a common leper). The leper here is symbolic of the less privileged in society succeeding if given an opportunity while the chief's beautiful daughter emblematises the absurd reality in patriarchy whereby women appear to be voiceless: her father has to choose a husband for her!

The beautiful princess is comparable to Namuddu in *Black Mamba* who is literally traded by her husband Berewa to Prof. Coarx for coital pleasures so Berewa can earn dirty lucre. Prof. Coarx thus compares to the lucky leper while Berewa becomes the Paramount Chief. From a literary perspective, the women in these two mini-narratives connote the citizens of the East African region who are literally at the mercy of their leaders (read the Paramount Chief and Berewa). These so-called powerful politicians, as this article has observed earlier, literally mortgage their subjects to the highest bidders purporting to be working for the common good, but are they? On the outside, they seem to move one step forward but when reality dawns on them, they discover they had moved two steps back. These are the absurd realities that Ruganda paints through these mini-narratives.

The final mini-narrative in *The Burdens* that questions the order of things is that of Wamala's nascent days of his relationship with Tinka. Wamala reminds Tinka that she had approached him saying: "Can I come to your house to borrow the *Complete Works of Mao Tse-tung*?" (p.39) Tinka confidently reminds him that in a way every woman approaches a man. Wamala reminds her that she is not a virgin, yet she becomes a nun at sixteen. This narrative disabuses the reader/audience of the commonly-held belief that nuns are celibate. A postmodernist rejection of Christianity is evident in this story. Wamala's denigration of the likes of Mother Superior and Fathers (priests) could be communicating Ruganda's stand against sham piety. Sham piety is an absurd reality in contemporary East Africa region. Both men and women of the cloth, and politicians often avail themselves to ridicule for literally emulating Moliere's (2019) Tartuffe in *Tartuffe*, Hawthorne's (2004) Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, Ibsen's (1964) Pastor Manders in *Ghosts*, and Kibera's (1985) Ezekiel in "A Silent Song", characters whose absurd actions make them easily memorable. All these illustrations affirm Lyotard's thinking that mini-narratives outweigh grand-narratives in their representation of reality, rendering local narratives better suited in explaining a phenomenon than relying on so-called universal/meta/grand narratives.

In short, *The Burdens* is a postmodernist play for it attracts a postmodernist interpretation with its multiple ways of reading a text. Besides the mini-narratives highlighted above, which focus on and laud various narrated local experiences instead of real actions, other aspects of postmodernism such as fragmentation of the family, which mirrors fragmentation of contemporary East Africa as a whole can be noticed; this is equally true to the instability and contradiction of the human experience which always appears discontinuous, indeterminate, relative, temporary, unfinished and generally jagged. The various possibilities presented herein make one read one experience in an open manner, for instance, Tinka's violent murder of Wamala, which is ascribed to her words to her children shortly before police officers arrive at the end of the play, can psychologically be interpreted as a purgation of what she perceives as thwarting her road to satisfaction, which is an impediment to her full attainment of contentment. Jourard's words (used earlier to depict the 'Convergence of mini-narratives and the

absurdity of the human condition'**)** eloquently beg to be relived here for they depict Tinka's ambivalent character:

> Things are seldom what they seem,
> Skim milk masquerades as cream.
> Externals don't display insides,
> Jekylls may be masquerading Hydes!

Readers of Ruganda's *The Burdens* could see Tinka's action as a crime deserving punishment, realising that she had told her son his grandmother's story of drunken men stabbed to death by their jealous wives, thus an imputation of motive. Imputation of motive here could render her legally liable for murder instead of manslaughter that could be associated with jealous outbursts in lovers. Spousal jealousy thus leads to a vain existence as emblematised by Tinka. Her vain attempt to poison the children against their father has come to nought. It is certain she is headed to jail where neither her husband nor her children will be seeing her. This is the absurd reality she is confronted with. Her actions can be compared to those of men and women in the region who attempt to usurp power using extra-constitutional mechanisms. It is probable the power they wield, the wealth they amass and the underdevelopment they cause the masses all end in absurdity for they leave no lasting legacies. Tinka's power is thus temporary, as Wamala's has been, an affirmation of Lyotard's thinking about the power of mini-narratives, which make a vivid representation of reality. This temporary power by fictional characters is further observed in the next section.

Of the Absurdity of Sibling Rivalry in *Shreds of Tenderness*

Arguably Ruganda's best attempt at presenting the destructiveness of family feuds, *Shreds of Tenderness* focuses on long-standing bitterness ascribed to sibling rivalry and attendant jealousy, betrayal, and assassination attempts. Odie and Wak definitely represent the two diametrically opposed sides of the rivalry while their sister Stella stands betwixt and between them as an honest arbiter. While the two brothers have no love lost between themselves, Stella works very hard to ensure their differences do not degenerate into outright hostility. The three youths lack

parental and/or communal support as was wont to happen in precolonial East Africa. Village elders were vital in conflict resolution as aptly illustrated by Odinga (1995) in his chapter "At the Feet of the Village Elders" (pp. 1-16) of his autobiography *Not yet Uhuru* that highlights various situations in which village elders ought to prevent or resolve disputes between/among members of the community. In one particular illustration, Jaramogi narrates how he had observed a case in which a widow's piece of land had failed to produce enough for her and her children. The village head, accompanied by his youthful aides, noticed it and instructed the youths to take maize from the widow's neighbours' granaries and, bit by bit, contribute enough for her to feed her children. This, Odinga recounts, served to prevent occurrence of conflict for the widow's children were effectively stopped from taking the law unto their hands in future, by invading the neighbours' granaries for food, to survive.

In Ruganda's *Shreds of Tenderness*, first mini-narrative is that of Odie claiming that his late father never loved him and that he preferred Wak to him. Odie claims that it is for that reason that he never bothered to celebrate his father's death anniversary. When Wak wonders why Odie never put their father's picture in the papers accompanied with the words 'IN LOVING MEMORY OF OUR DEAR BELOVED DAD', (p.120), Odie responds, 'The man never loved me, that's why.' Odie then explains how his father felt that he (Odie) was a disgrace to the family and how he totally ignored him on being expelled from university in the wake of their strike. Further, he lamented that his father never bothered to find him a scholarship in spite of their mother's entreaties. This narrative reveals the deep-seated hate Odie bears against his father. Odie indirectly blames Wak here for his own (Odie's) suffering after this expulsion because his father, in Odie's imagination, loved only Wak. This mini-narrative of sibling rivalry is the first in *Shreds of Tenderness*. Psychologically, to Odie, his father's death could not have come at a better time. It thus accorded him a chance to pay off his imaginary old scores against Wak. This temporal occurrence, something Lyotard notes as attributive to mini-narratives, brings out the absurdity of the human condition. Blame games abound in various societies whenever humans fail to coexist. Does this happen, realistically or historically rather, in contemporary East Africa region?

The subsequent near-arrest and fleeing from home of Wak is directly attributable to Odie's malicious scheming (pp. 122-124) probably because of his hatred or envy or that inexplicable grudge he had always had against him 'for seeming to do better in class' (p.131). This is the second mini-narrative of *Shreds of Tenderness*. Odie himself, acting as a demented character, reminiscently exhibits verbiage on his call to the State Research Bureau asking to be put through to the Major-General:

> … I've got a curious case on my hands. One Wak Witu…I said Wak Witu, sir. (*To himself*) Christ! Is everyone deaf or am I dumb? .... Isn't he my brother?' … of course he is my brother, sir. Same father, that is. But he is becoming a bit of a nuisance. Threatening to give a talk on democracy and all that … (*Fumbles around in his pockets*) He calls it, "THE INEVITABLE ROAD THAT WILL LEAD US BACK TO DEMOCRACY' … Yes, always seething with discontent, this brother of mine, like all the rest of his intellectual colleagues … You are right, sir. They must be hirelings of foreign forces. Marxist, I should say. Extremely dangerous. Will arouse the public against the government … Sorry? (p. 123).

Pertinent to this mini-narrative is this streak of insanity for it gives Wak a chance to confirm that it was indeed Odie who had sold him (Wak) out to SRB. What does this betrayal and its subsequent revelation inform the reading public? What about the people of the East Africa region? Perhaps no one explains Odie's and Wak's behaviours better than Jean-Paul Sartre:

> Sartre conceived humans as beings who create their own world by rebelling against authority and by accepting personal responsibility for their actions, unaided by society, traditional morality, or religious faith. Distinguishing between human existence and the nonhuman world, he maintained that human existence is characterised by nothingness, that is, by the capacity to negate and rebel. ((*Microsoft*® *Encarta*®, 2007)

It is probable, as seen in Odie's call to the SRB that Wak could have been a revolutionary rebelling against the brutal administration headed by Boss. His decision to flee into exile thus implies taking personal responsibility for

his rebellion against authority, however wicked that authority was. Similarly, Odie's madness and subsequent revelation of his role in spying on his brother means he has taken responsibility for his vile action. Odie's actions thus yield nothing for him because Wak has ultimately returned home safely. The property Odie had plotted to inherit, alone, is still within his jurisdiction for Wak had to sit 'down nights and nights on end trying to decide whether to come back or not' (p.76).

Indubitably, Wak presents himself as a patriot when he vehemently denies having returned home to his father's house intent on reclaiming it. On the converse, he asserts: "It's my country, however desecrated and dilapidated" (p.79). Odie's scheming has thus come to nought, an absurd labouring without end. What follows this declaration is the candid revelation of the conditions that refugees are made to grapple with. These conditions are hideous, tedious and humiliating. No one could, in all good conscience, prefer them to home, the reason Wak rebels against a semblance of order in exile to return home, however derelict home might be. The two brothers' experiences aptly capture the essence of mini-narratives according to Lyotard: They portray the provisionality and relativeness of reality thus enabling characters to discover the absurdity of the human condition. This is a viable lesson for the leaders of the East Africa region: neither money nor material possessions have eternal longevity!

Odie's scheming ends up as an absurdity due to Wak's overcoming of physical hardship and culture shock in exile. Wak's eventual return home results in Odie's chagrin. Wak's account on this constitutes the third mini-narrative in the play. The banality of life as a refugee is painted by Wak as abominable:

> Wak: … Shouted at. Your dignity lowered. Hell, man. It is a blight…From the sweeper to the highest official they subtly remind you that you don't belong. You are an alien. That word stinks. *Alien*. *Makwerekwere*, a third-rate non-citizen, always associated with hunger and deprivation and cheap labour. Worse than cheap labour. Because sometimes no one wants you to work. Your very presence is an irritant. Whether or not you do as much work as the nationals do,

> they always say behind your back that you're not fully committed. You are saving your energies for your mother country. If you do more, they will jokingly tell you, 'You're buying your stay.' It's hell, man. You're always living in perpetual fear of losing your job if you have one. If you have none, it is deadly worse, I can tell you that (pp. 80-81).

Wak's account thus invites the reader to the politics of identity. Humans…races…religions…nationalities… to name but a few, are identities constructed, save for the first one, to suit various intents tailored to benefit the creators while exploiting the OTHER. A human being, like any other, a refugee deserves humane treatment. Discrimination however seems to be the order of the day according to Wak's account. Wak's exiling had been solely caused by Odie. Odie is thus frustrated by Wak's safe return. He has come to the realisation that his (Odie's) vain avarice had not borne fruit. It thus consigns his contingent and temporal actions to the realm of absurdity.

Buber (1922), best known for his philosophy of dialogue, distinguishes between direct, equitable relations (which he designated the "I-Thou" relationship, or dialogue) and indirect exploitative ('I-It') relationship. In this "I-Thou" relationship, each person regards the other as of unique value, something pertinent to coexistence. Buber, on the converse, wrote about indirect, utilitarian relations which he gave the appellation "I-It" relationship, or monologue. In an "I-It' relationship, the relationship is exploitative in nature for each person knows and uses others but does not really see or value them for themselves. This effectively renders one a write-off immediately they lose utility. Though fictitious, the absurd unfolding of events here mirrors what has happened and continues to happen in the East Africa region. Almost all the countries in the region have had brutal dictators (or some violence of one kind or another) that have impacted on a section of the citizenry the same way it did to Wak. Buber's 'I-It' relationships thus abound and so-called charitable countries which harbour refugees are not different. Wak's earlier account of the life of a refugee and the subsequent play-within-a-play scene (pp.87-98) which indeed corroborates his narrative, confirm Buber's philosophising. Buber's "I-It' thus renders humanity null in a world replete with struggles to acquire

lucre and power, an absurd struggle without end. This agrees with Lyotard's thinking that mini-narratives are preferable because they easily justify provisional, contingent, temporal and relative realities that humans grapple with in various parts of the world, time after time. The fourth mini-narrative in the play is the designation of Wak as a cowardly traitor by Odie:

> You took to the bush, man, didn't you? You deserted us. Dad dead. Mother still seriously sick in Nsanbya Hospital and Stella in school. Country in total chaos. You fled like a frightened chicken and never looked back. For ten dead years, you never bothered to look back till now. It wasn't necessary either, was it, for you to take to the bush? It wasn't. I said it then and I'll say it again and again – it was plain cowardice (p.84).

Wak furiously reacts to this by pulling out a pistol and shooting in the air threatening to shoot Odie, saying: "Don't you ever call me a coward, Odie, do you understand? DON'T YOU EVER…" (p.84). He further explains to Odie that he was lucky to be his blood brother, his father's son and that if he was not, Wak would not hesitate to shoot him. This scene is the most intense in *Part II* of the play. It also functions as the turning point that leads to the revelation of Odie's mental condition by Stella who says that, indeed, Odie has been admitted to Butabika Mental Hospital (p.85). Calling Wak a traitor brings Odie out as a cold calculating sadist who cannot hesitate to lure his brother to ruin, for Wak would certainly have faced death had he not fled from home. The absurdity of vindictiveness animated by avarice and a burning determination to inherit property becomes clear here: like Odie's folly, contemporary East Africa region boasts of broken families and failed states because of such reckless actions. This will continue to change though for, according to Lyotard, these fictional realities mirror historical realities: Everything is temporal and relative.

In a nutshell, the mini-narratives in Ruganda's *Shreds of Tenderness* tend to mirror families and entire societies destroyed because of unhealthy sibling rivalry that ultimately aim at, as Odie's example has illustrated, strategically placing oneself in a position to solely inherit their parents' wealth. Such condescending and calculating characters abound in the East

Africa region, from families to nation-states. Such malicious calculations have always ended up as miscalculations that have destroyed families and nations, vindicating Buber's conceptualisation of 'I-It' relationships in which humans relegate fellow humans to the status of animals. The absurd reality thus remains the same throughout the region: Human and economic development indexes remain elusive and nonperforming. They are however provisional and temporal as Lyotard has speculated in his theory.

Of the Dangerous Mien of a Black Mamba

Ruganda's *Black Mamba* certainly paints the picture of a dangerous snake that must be avoided at any cost or else it will strike without notice, to devastating consequences. The main characters in the play certainly exhibit this treachery. From Berewa's avaricious and threatening comportment to Namuddu's concealed innocence; from Prof. Coarx's libidinous machismo to Odiambo's wily diplomacy, none can claim a clean hand in trustworthiness. They all betray one another in their interpersonal intercourses. And, like it has been observed in this analysis, these acts of betrayal, from their causation to expression, are copycats of Eurocentricism.

The mini-narratives or events rather that one encounters in *Black Mamba*, present a totally different, nay, unexpected turn of events insofar as eking out one's bread and butter is concerned. This eccentricity is in the modus operandi that Berewa introduces his wife to in order to earn some money: lending her out to Prof. Coarx to offer him sexual services. Unlike in *The Burdens* where Tinka sells illicit brew, comparisons can be made to 19th century Scandinavia, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1989), where, in the event of dire need for money, Nora takes a loan to pay for her husband's treatment. This is similar to Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1989) where Hedda's husband George takes a loan to help them settle down in the wake of their wedding. In *Black Mamba*, however, Namuddu agrees with her husband to engage in 'prostitution' in order to make Berewa realize his dream: "I believe in prosperity and good life Namuddu" (p.2). Berewa repeats this on pages 3, 9, 10 and 75. Though prosperity is his dream, it is not clear how his operational technique is going to realise it. The prosperity he is talking about can best be deciphered from a Eurocentric perspective. He continues: "I called you from home to come and help me rise up very quickly, and

there are plenty of chances here. We have three more months before the professor's wife comes back" (p.3). Berewa's words border on the absurd! This absurdity is clear in the fact that earning what Namuddu has earned from Prof. Coarx in three months' time would not make them obtain all that is required to live a good life. Namuddu's and Berewa's motivation, unlike Tinka's, Nora's and Hedda's, is sheer avarice. Good life here is thus a mirage. Namuddu's appetite for good things seems to have been whetted by her experience with Prof. Coarx's one hundred shillings' night's experience. When she tells Berewa about her desire for new clothes, which he is vehemently opposed to, she says:

> Namuddu: They are old ones. I also want something new. Day in day out, I see women here dressed smartly. I get ashamed of my rags. I want to look like Namatta, for instance, high-heeled shoes, a necklace, earrings and a handbag. That's what your wife should look like (p. 2).

Namuddu's insistence that Namatta had gotten rich, probably this way (by prostitution), is mere speculation. Berewa's rebuttal sounds more credible:

> Berewa: That's just the kind you will be if you do what I want you to do. But don't start nagging about it. Why panic? There is plenty of time. Your Namatta didn't get all that in a day, nor did they fall from the sky like manna. She had to sweat for them (p. 2).

Sounding realistic here, Berewa's words would disabuse Namuddu of her naivety. She probably thinks she would earn a lot from Prof. Coarx, something time proves untrue. However credible Berewa's advice to Namuddu might sound, his actions are tantamount to the actions of the region's political and religious class whose exploitative nature is largely responsible for the underdevelopment of the region. These so-called leaders lie to the population about projects that would bring about prosperity but do such projects bring the promised prosperity to the population? The citizens end up going round and round in circles in a journey without end. This is as absurd as absurd can be in every sense of the word. In

postmodernist literary interpretation, meaning is sometimes attributable to what is absent from a literary text (revert to the earlier quote from Jourard on the third page of this article). Therefore, the meaning this article is associating with political and religious operatives in contemporary East Africa region agrees with postmodernist literary concepts, nay, with Lyotard's use of provisionality and temporariness. The journey without end here in which Berewa and Namuddu do not realise the wealth they had set out to acquire is what constitutes literary absurdity.

The second mini-narrative in *Black Mamba* is Berewa's incessant brooding about having helped Namuddu's family to the extent that he was literally impoverished. He lists the losses caused him by both Namuddu and her family as a justification for his decision to have her render sexual services to Prof. Coarx for pay:

> Berewa: … But if we are going to replace that house which you burnt down carelessly and if we are ever to refill that kraal which we emptied when your father was sick, we can't afford to be ourselves (p. 4).

Namuddu reprimands Berewa for having promised never to repeat such a story. He however continues to ruminate:

> Berewa: And there is that colossal amount of money which we lavished on your brother's education. If only he could remember what I did for him, he would regard me with more favour than a dog does a shilling. But your honourable brother chooses to forget everything (pp. 4-5).

This mini-narrative is a flashback to the couple's past. Berewa is determined to actualise his plan of 'making money' from Prof. Coarx using Namuddu. He thus reverts to the narrative about the burning of his house, an act that was probably inadvertently perpetrated by Namuddu, and the favours he had extended to her family (using all his savings on her father's medical expenses and her brother's educational expenses) as the rationale for his demands. Now, thus, is her time to requite. These apparently flimsy excuses for his failure to grow financially bring Berewa out as a dishonest man. Family expenditures are hugely matters of give and take. He has not revealed whether Namuddu had herself failed in her duties and

responsibilities as a spouse. He has not also revealed whether the money he had paid as his father's medical expense had been marked as a loan that Namuddu had to pay back. The educational expenses he had met for his brother-in-law had not been paid as a debt either. Making Namuddu appear to have owed him lots of money is thus an absurdity. Taken as a family head, thus representative of a community or a national leader, Berewa paints the regional leaders in a very bad light. What he stands for is that leader who, having failed to deliver on their mandate, resorts to blame games. This is happening right now in the East Africa region. This is the meaningless existence observed in literary absurdity, affirming Lyotard's thinking that mini-narratives represent the provisionality and temporariness of reality.

Nothing paints Prof. Coarx in a very bad light like his perturbation about his marriage as seen in the next mini-narrative in *Black Mamba*. He confounds as well as baffles the reader with his blatant declaration to Namuddu that he has "…never found joy in marriage …never found joy at all" (p.26). The following assertion is even more flowery a way to use words: "These few days I have spent with you have been the happiest of all my life, happiest as man and woman can be happy" (p.26). Coarx's words sound extravagant but could turn out to be true. Perhaps at the time of uttering them, his senses informed him that he was feeling on top of the world. With growing ecstasy, he reveals what he found lascivious in her: "You are full of charm, Namuddu, of sweetness and laughter; of warmth and innocence. You may be unread, but you are not untutored in the pleasant ways of nature" (p.27). Coarx contrasts Namuddu's carnal and cerebral endowments using the words unread… untutored… pleasant… nature. This begs the reader to answer the question as to whether the two faculties (body and mind) must be summoned when someone is engaged in what is mostly driven by hormonal reactions. Yearning to attend to this philosophical matter more deeply, Coarx continues:

> There is only one fundamental passion in man, love. Of all the weaknesses a man may have, of all the strength of character a man may possess, young or old, master or servant, it is love: love of a woman. It is love that makes men

> fight, it is love that makes them love. Love is the spring-board of life, of joy and success. Its absence breeds utter failure, bitterness and death (p.29).

Coarx's spirited explanation is both valid and null. Valid in that he probably centres his argument around the untrained passion associated with the teenage gush of hormones thus Mother's Nature's way of making organisms copulate, procreate and perpetuate their existence on her bottomless bowels. Talking of love as being the spring from whence humanity's water stems, Coarx not only succeeds in convincing Namuddu to move closer to his heart but drives himself deeper into the realm of emotional turmoil. On the converse, it is null in that the difference between love and infatuation, or love and obsession can be best explained by the one experiencing the emotion or reason. It thus leaves the interpretation open *ad infinitum*. The conflict within himself pushes him further into this revelation:

> I have spent seven years with my wife, no, seven years have spent me, growling in a dark pit of bitter animosities. I know love well, because I have lived on the other side of it, always moving from unbearable uncertainties to agonizing absurdities. Well, what of that? Doesn't love really transcend petty prejudices of creed, colour and status? (p.28)

That he has been in a loveless marriage for seven years destabilises his lived truth. It makes one reflect on why one would put up with a loveless marriage for that long. Enduring bitterness and agony, as he puts it, while opportunities like the one that has opened his eyes here (his liaison with Namuddu) abound, leads to this logical conclusion: Humans determine their own destinies in a world without meaning or end. In a poignant reflection on what Maria Popova (2013) calls 'our self-imposed unhappiness' (she quotes Benjamin Franklin as having postulated that true happiness and beauty could only result from order), Camus (1956), in a letter to a hospitalised friend, repudiates Franklin's take by 'stirringly reminding us that order itself, when worshipped too blindly and rigidly, can consume our fragile chance of happiness' (Popova, 2013). Prof. Coarx's decision to live what he claims to be a loveless life and yet, as he claims at the same time, there exists a love that transcends creed, colour and status,

renders his condition absurd. Why he persists for seven good years in a meaningless marriage is logically defeatist. Lyotard's thinking that mini-narratives reflect contingency and relativeness comes handy here: Interpreting the human condition is not a walk in the park as Coarx's deceptive experience here reveals. His situation can also be summarised by existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (2006) who, stressing the ambiguity and paradoxical nature of human life, contended that the fundamental problems of life defy rational objective explanation rendering the highest truth subjective. Prof. Coarx is an individual who chooses what Kierkegaard regards as the aesthetic way of life in which the individual "constantly seeks variety and novelty in an effort to stave off boredom but eventually must confront boredom and despair" (*Microsoft® Encarta®*, 2007).

Can this absurd existence be replicated in contemporary Eastern Africa region by both leaders in every sphere of life and the citizens themselves? The reason this article brings in citizens while in its earlier illustrations it tends to blame political and religious leaders only is that the region's underdevelopment is partially brought about by the citizens' vacillation and ambivalence. Blame is, thus, apportioned between the two groups. In more progressive societies, reactionary establishments are deposed by the population. Thus, like Coarx who has put up with a loveless marriage for a very long time, the citizens have put up with moribund and barren administrations for decades resulting in despair and ignominy. This is the provisionality that Lyotard had thought about: A people's reaction to a situation will depend on various factors, seen and unseen.

This argument on the mini-narratives in Ruganda's *Black Mamba* signals that the play largely reveals what French philosopher Albert Camus called absurd existence. Dale (2006) writes this about Camus' works:

> The novel *L'étranger* (1942; *The Stranger,* 1946), the essay *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; *The Myth of Sisyphus,* 1955), and the plays *Caligula* (1944; translated 1958) and *Le malentendu* (1944; *The Misunderstanding,* 1958) make up what Camus called "the cycle of the absurd." In these works, Camus illustrated his sense of the absurdity of human existence: Human beings are not absurd, and

> the world is not absurd, but for humans to be in the world is absurd (*Microsoft® Encarta®*, 2006).

This absurdity in this quotation stems from the wondrous workings betwixt and between chance and design, the two antagonistic forces that shape humankind's existence. The nature of a black mamba for instance is that it is extremely poisonous, very fast and sly. Its slipperiness makes it avoid both predatory animals and humans who might want to kill it. Characters in this play who could be termed black mambas include Berewa, Namuddu, Prof. Coarx, Odiambo and the policemen. These characters work behind one another's backs throughout the play. Their motivations vary from avarice to desire for copulation to ambiguous nationalism. Camus illustrates this absurdity of existence in his books as commented further by Dale thusly:

> In Camus's view, humans cannot feel at home in the world because they yearn for order, clarity, meaning, and eternal life, while the world is chaotic, obscure, and indifferent and offers only suffering and death. Thus, human beings are estranged or alienated from the world. Integrity and dignity require them to face and accept the human condition as it is and to find purely human solutions to their plight. The protagonist of *L'étranger,* who was awaiting death after being condemned, and the Greek mythical hero Sisyphus, who was condemned to roll a heavy rock up a hill forever, both know a uniquely human kind of happiness because they accept the limits of human reason and life. The Roman Emperor Caligula, in Camus's play of that name, exceeds those limits, tries to be a god, embodies the absurd, and must be destroyed by the revolt of his subjects (*Microsoft® Encarta®*, 2007).

It is evident from Camus' theorisation that the contradictions observed in human life are, indeed, beyond human powers to determine absolute order. Humans can only do enough and leave the rest to forces beyond their control. In their absurd yearning for satisfaction, which is more of an aspiration rather than a realisation, Berewa, Namuddu, Coarx and Odiambo, sooner rather than later, discover that their efforts have ended in nought. They thus embrace the realities surrounding their very existence: Berewa and Namuddu must stick to their lane as poor folks while Coarx

probably returns home to his wife of seven years of loveless existence. Odiambo must go back to his employer (he has been working as a snitch against Coarx) or perhaps return to college if he indeed is a student as he purports. They thus must accept the limits of human reason and life as Camus puts it, and instead of taking a leap of faith or committing suicide on realising that the world lacks meaning or purpose, they must accept and live in a world devoid of meaning or purpose which is provisional and contingent as Lyotard has observed. This is probably what the nationals of contemporary East Africa region ought to realise so that both the leaders and the citizens can embrace real solutions to the problems they are grappling with.

Writing on the essence of self-discipline in guaranteeing democracy, Popova (2021), quoting ancient Chinese philosopher and statesman Confucius (551–479 BCE), while underscoring the indelible link between personal and political morality, says that the Chinese sage:

> …recognized that interpersonal kindness is the foundation of social justice, recognised that democracy — a form of government only just invented on the other side of the globe in ancient Greece, not to take root in his own culture for epochs — begins in the heart (Popova, 2021).

Notably, the characters in the plays analysed in this article fail to live up to Popova's thinking on self-discipline. This article concludes that the mini-narratives derived from the selected plays by Ruganda bear glaring evidence on the lack of self-discipline by the majority of the main characters. This culminates in absurdity, the inability of these characters to gain anything worthwhile. The main characters are presented as bossy, determined, condescending and violent. The wells of disappointment are dug deep by Tinka and Wamala in *The Burdens* as they grapple with the ancient unanswered question: '*Who is more compassionate about raising children, fathers or mothers?*' Each determined to pursue their own truth, refuses to heed society's moral imperatives. They both end up tragically, leaving their children in the arms of strangers who might end up abusing them. This means that among the want, greed and hate that the Wamala

family was grappling with, none was really solved so the children would lead a normal life in a family set-up.

The same story is repeated in the mini-narratives in *Black Mamba* where interpersonal relationships such as spousal love and affection, family life, and mutual existence are scorned, making Ruganda's plays, like those by Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw, among others, fall into what Brustein (1991) designated *The Theatre of Revolt*. They seem to construct characters who rebel against social mores. Berewa barely understands what it takes to live together as husband and wife, transforming Namuddu into a commodity (for sale), since, to him, lucre is more attractive than human dignity. Morality and propriety as defined by the community struggle to gain a foothold amidst unmatched springs of material want and spiritual vacuity. Berewa, Namuddu and Coarx thus come out as rebels whose revolt against social mores goes unpunished.

In effect, Ruganda constructs Odie, in *Shreds of Tenderness*, who does abominable things in an attempt to solely inherit his late father's wealth. Odie's vast experience in the areas of betrayal and indifference (animated by his love for lucre and material prosperity) cannot evade the prying eyes of the reader/audience. He easily comes out as the quintessence of the worst in humanity, giving credence to literary postmodernism in which chaos rules supreme for everything is relative as Lyotard had speculated. The vanities in the plays are ascribed to individuals who are determined to lead miserable absurd existences in a bid to find what Kierkegaard (2006) regards as the aesthetic, individuals constantly seeking pleasure but eventually failing to stave off boredom and despair. It is absurd because the mini-narratives on which this analysis is based, all lead the reader, the audience rather, to conclusions which reduce the carnal pursuits the characters are engaged in to efforts in futility.

Gauged against the realities ascribed to the socio-political and religious experiences of the peoples of contemporary East Africa, it can be deduced that this absurd order of events abounds. Governments in parts of the region claim to be democratic and progressive even though they have literally cannibalised entire countries, rendering the citizenry destitute through the malady of kleptomania (Nyagemi, 2019). This narrative tends

to replicate itself in virtually most of contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa, resulting in a political and economic reductio ad absurdum.

Conclusion

Reading Ruganda, therefore, makes it probable to see the entire contemporary African continent in a microcosmic perspective because biting penury, family failure, outright betrayal, political wheeler-dealing, and other repressive practices which render democracy (or rather progress) null, abound. Though Ruganda seems not to refrain from condemning what seems to be downright disgusting in the ways of life of the peoples of contemporary East Africa and by extension contemporary Africa, what this article designates his action, he does not unequivocally reveal what might be done to remedy the repugnant state of affairs, what this article calls his inaction. It is therefore clear that by refraining from assigning overt revolutionary duties aimed at transforming the 'order of things' to individual characters throughout the selected plays, Ruganda suggests that it is upon the population to stand up against repression and liberate themselves. He seems to be grappling with deep pessimism about the future of the region, nay the continent, when he tailors two major families in *Black Mamba* who, glaringly, lack children. The same is true to *Shreds of Tenderness* where Odie, Wak and Stella have no children. This lack of children in the three families portends ill for the region.

Moreover, the Wamala family in *The Burdens* has two children, Kaija and Nyakake, who, tragically, have become orphaned at a tender age. Their father's murder (see pp. 76-81) means their mother will be carted off to prison, leaving the two little children consigned to an orphanage. What does this tell us? Among other speculations, it does not take a keen observer long to discover that these orphaned children represent African populations who, due to failed socio-political and religious orders in the region, and by extension the continent, find themselves under siege by foreigners from Asia, Europe and North America. Some try to enter Europe via the Mediterranean but tragically perish in the Mediterranean's unfathomable bowels. To borrow from Camus' (1955) theorisation, this article contends that Ruganda's absurd art does not try to explain experience, but simply describes it, giving the critic a chance to read the

works as a blatant mockery of the cultures the region had embraced: betrayal, primitive acquisitiveness, pursuit of self-realisation, violence and short-cuts to success (Nyagemi, 2019). These individual pursuits deal a deathly blow to societal welfare. Evidently nonetheless, all these pursuits come to nought, challenging the citizens of the entire contemporary East Africa to re-evaluate themselves. Meticulous dramatic fiction and the clear daylight of reality thus become conjoined twins for they inform as well as influence each other.

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