

## Feminization of the Ugandan nation in John Ruganda's *The Floods, The Burdens* and *Black Mamba*<sup>1</sup>

Chris J.C. Wasike  
Wits University

### Introduction

The late John Ruganda remains, arguably, one of East Africa's most eminent dramatists, directors, theatre critics and practitioners. His dramatic genius has been particularly outstanding and a number of his politically-nuanced plays have, to this day, continued to feature prominently in the English and Literature curricula at both high school and university levels in East Africa—more so in Uganda and Kenya. Up until his passing away in December 2007 after a long battle with throat cancer, his intellectual influence had transcended his writings and theatrical performances and certainly immortalized him into an unmistakable trailblazer in the East African theatre landscape. Apart from the three plays *The Floods* (1980), *The Burdens* (1972) and *Black Mamba* (1972), which are the focus of our current analysis, Ruganda has written and produced other equally popular dramatic works such as *Covenant with Death* (1973), *Music without Tears* (1982) and *Echoes of Silence* (1986). He also published a collection of short stories titled *Igereka and Other African Narrative Stories* (2001).

This article focuses on what I consider to be John Ruganda's three most recognized, studied and politically engaging plays namely *The Floods, The Burdens* and *Black Mamba*. It is also the premise of this essay that the three plays by far represent the most sustained dramatic exposition of the political turmoil and decline that characterized the Ugandan nation in 1970s and 1980s. I am keen to illustrate how the playwright uses the female characters' voices, bodies and their sexuality as a metaphor for reading the complexities, contradictions and constructions of the Ugandan nation especially during Idi Amin's dictatorship. Fully aware that different scholars have pointed out the ambivalent reality of attempting to read the post-colonial African nation within the ambit of motherhood, I am not unproblematically seeking to oversimplify this trope into a stable monolithic concept that can easily be identified in literary works. Echoing Benedict Anderson's figuration of nationhood as an 'imagined' construct

---

<sup>1</sup> A draft of this paper was initially presented at the University of Botswana's Department of English 5th Conference titled *Mapping Africa in English Speaking World* that was held from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> June 2009. However this version is markedly different and includes new concepts especially on 'troubled motherhood' and the African literary canon.

and contested terrain, I also appreciate how the trope of Mother Africa is equally fluid and problematic. However in the current analysis, I proceed from the assumption that gender is a set of lived and embodied realities, and hope to demonstrate how Ruganda's project of highlighting the role of women in society is, in many ways, a politically conscious strategy of reconfiguring and re-imagining the Ugandan nation-state within the historical reality of not just Amin's dictatorial era, but of the post-independence African political dictatorship in general.

The thrust of my argument is an exegesis of Ruganda's simultaneous depiction of female characters and dramatic deployment of their roles as metaphors of the political order in Uganda at the time. I specifically hope to demonstrate how Ruganda's plays project the female characters' bodies as symbols of sexualized identity and contradictions, yet recognizing how the same bodies can be read as canvases that intersect between the semiotic and material dimensions of gender power and the imagination of the nation. In a sense, the article aims to show how Ruganda's dramaturgy as deployed through the female characters, their bodies and their dramatic conversations is subversive to the extent to which it gestures towards a feminizing project especially in terms of challenging the way men name women as symbols of African postcolonial nations.

Before analyzing how the Mother Africa trope is deployed in Ruganda's drama I briefly examine how various critics have grappled with the use of the woman/ mother as a metaphor of nation in African literature. Florence Stratton reminds us that the Mother Africa trope was mooted in the Negritude school of Léopold Senghor and his contemporaries who through their writings sought to depict Africa in the figure of the woman (39). Nonetheless she warns that many male writers often employ the trope within "the Manichean allegory of male and female, domination and subordination, mind and body, subject and object, self and other" binaries and "the female characters are often projected in the form either of a young girl, nubile erotic or of a fecund nurturing mother," hence the trope being named Mother Africa. In many other instances, Stratton reckons, the "woman serves as an index of the state of the nation" with the private individual destiny of a female figure ... serving as an allegory of the embattled situation of the public ... culture and society" (41). Patricia Alden observes that this trope needs to be better understood within the context of "the feminist challenge to patriarchal authority" and a corresponding and equally over-determined "attempt to create convincing and interesting women characters" (68). Yet, as Stratton emphasizes, while using the woman as sign of the nation was fashionable among a certain cohort of male African writers, the trope delineates a situation that is 'conventionally patriarchal' in addition to operating at levels that are "against the interests of women, excluding them implicitly if not explicitly" by sexually comparing their bodies to "African landscapes meant for men to explore and discover" (40).

However, to unravel Ruganda's gender figuration of his female characters as subversive allegories of the postcolonial Africa nation in

general and in some instances Uganda, my analysis will benefit from Elleke Boehmer's views, which contend that "woman-as-sign buttresses ... and bulks large in nationalist imaginings" and the "mother trope is a politically motivated metaphor knitting together images of common womb and origin of a shared birth ground ... an investment in a typically masculine nationalist imaginary" (89). Similar views are underscored by novelist Mariama Ba as read by Mineke Schipper when she asserts that women "no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother who in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa" (47). In this article, though, the central aim is to ascertain the extent to which Ruganda uses his female characters to bring out this trope while at the same time relying on the characters to tell the African/Ugandan political narrative. The article will venture to demonstrate how Ruganda's dramatic intentions of framing his female characters within the patriarchal male gaze of Mother Africa are inadvertently subverted by the characters themselves through their actions and utterances. But before doing this it is necessary to briefly sketch out the historical events of the Amin era that are imbricated in and alluded to in the plays under discussion.

#### 'Troubled Motherhood' and the Idi Amin Figure in Ruganda's Plays

The idea of personal narratives as allegories of the nation can easily be gleaned from the plot of events not just in *The Burdens* but also in *Black Mamba* and *The Floods*. Borrowing from Fredric Jameson's idea of allegory as captured in his article "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," we can argue that the stories of the private familial destinies in Ruganda's three plays are "allegories of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society" (69) of Amin's Uganda. Indeed, as Patrick McGee adds, allegory "arises from a culture in which the real world has become meaningless, devoid of intrinsic value, fragmented yet mysterious" (241). Narrating the chaotic state of affairs during the initial years of Amin's rule, Mutibwa, for instance, remembers how two years into his reign, Amin had suddenly turned into a systematic, ruthless and intolerant brute who unleashed terror and death on anybody who opposed his coup takeover. In the beginning many Ugandans were prepared to give the new administration the benefit of doubt, apparently imagining it would offer welcome relief from Obote's earlier repressive regime (Kiyimba 124).

Initially Amin's pursuit of statesmanlike policies convinced many early cynics that Amin was indeed a "man of peace" (Mutibwa 78). But after his takeover (1971-1973) "the coup which had been greeted with jubilation began to deteriorate into a systematic breakdown of organized social institutions" (Kiyimba 124). The slaughter of civilians and members of the armed forces who were perceived to be loyal to ousted president Milton Obote was particularly rampant during the early years of Amin's rule. Even worse was when he ordered the expulsion of citizens/non-

citizens of Asian origin in August 1972. Throughout his rule, Amin was known to have been extremely callous as his henchmen unleashed unprecedented terror on a hapless population. His murder squads were unstoppable and many people lost their relatives and friends as fear and despondency reigned.

The characters and events in Ruganda's three plays appear to resonate directly with the historical reality in Uganda at the time the plays were first written and performed. For instance, at the time *The Burdens* was first performed at the Uganda National Theatre by Ruganda's own Makonde Group sometime in January 1972, the play's storyline couldn't have been more relevant. Since those years, the image of Amin as a ruthless murderer has remained significant, not just to Uganda's political experience and history, but as a ubiquitous personality cult that has spawned many volumes of literature. Apart from Ruganda's plays there exists a huge chunk of outstanding (both creative and non-creative) works that were inspired by the character of Amin and images of turbulence in Uganda in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Most of the works especially by Ugandan authors could not be published until after the overthrow of Amin in 1979. Many other writers like John Ruganda and Peter Nazareth were forced to escape from the repressive state apparatus of Amin's tyranny and only wrote from the safe havens of exile. Others like Alumidi Osinya remained in Uganda and used pseudonyms to protect their real identities, but the likes of Byron Kawadwa were not lucky enough to survive Amin's killer squads (Mbowa). Based on the large production of works that targeted exposing the grim picture of the Amin reign and an equally overwhelming attention to his effect on the national psyche, one can arguably agree with Kiyimba's assertion that Idi Amin is still "the most dominant single factor in Ugandan literature today" (124).

Ruganda's plays are heavily inundated with characters, events and themes that can easily be traced back to the period of Amin's reign. Because of the political situation at the times he wrote and performed his plays, many of his dramatic plots sound like allegories of the Ugandan nation. In *The Burdens* for instance, the central female character of Tinka is moulded as a 'troubled mother' figure of the Ugandan nation. The play recounts the fall to disgrace and squalor of a once rich politician who has since been deposed from his position as a government minister and is now wallowing in abject poverty and penury. Wamala, a former cabinet minister in the Old Veteran's government and recently released from detention because of his alleged involvement in an attempt to topple the government he once served in, is clearly finding it difficult to accept his

---

<sup>2</sup> I have in mind works such as Henry Kyemba's *A State of Blood* (1977), Donald Westlake's *Kahawa* (1981), Leslie Watkin's *The Killing of Idi Amin* (1976), James Konrad's *Target Amin* (1977), Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* (1984), Byron Kawadwa's *The Song of Wankoko* (1971), Peter Nazareth's *The General is Up* (1984), Alumidi Osinya's *The Amazing Saga of Field Marshall Salim Fisi (or How the Hyena Got His!)* (1977) and Alan Tacca's *Silent Rebel* (1984). For a more detailed discussion of the plight of writers during Amin's dictatorship, see also Kiyimba and Mbowa.

new demeaning status of impoverishment. He takes to heavy drinking to drown his sorrows and depression, whiling away his time and little earnings with his equally frustrated colleagues at the Republic bar. He continues to live under the illusion that things are not what they seem to be as he engages in debauchery and idle chitchat much to the chagrin of his wife Tinka. Meanwhile his two children—Kaija and Nyakake—barely eke out a living. Kaija is particularly frustrated by the fact that even as a grown boy he still has to share bedding with his sister Nyakake, who constantly wets the bed and makes his nights unbearable. At the beginning of the play, Ruganda uses stage directions to explain how Tinka wears an “I have been through hell” kind of face (*The Burdens* 1). As I shall illustrate shortly, Tinka’s body appears to gesture towards a ‘troubled mother’ symbolism and the image of an abandoned wife. From her facial features, one can clearly discern a female body that is harassed and humiliated both by her own husband and the harsh realities of the family’s changed lifestyle.

Clearly, Tinka’s troubles emanate from the tyranny and brutal treatment she receives from her husband. To a certain extent, she becomes a victim of a patriarchal violence meted out by her insensitive husband. In one particular incident, Wamala injures her in a scuffle over a bottle of *enguli* which he had stolen from Tinka’s brew, hidden outside their house. Wamala’s character can be read as having a lot of resonances with the political discourse that informed Idi Amin’s dictatorship. As Wilhelm Reich reminds us,

In the figure of the father, the authoritarian state has its representative in every family, so that the family becomes its most important instrument of power. (qtd. in Alden 74)

The same view is emphasized by Alden who argues that “patriarchy is a key variation of African dictatorship and indeed the fundamental ground upon which it flourishes” (75). *The Burdens* is about the depiction of the struggle for control of familial space between Wamala and Tinka; a struggle that affects the lives of Tinka and the children; a struggle that is inscribed on the body of Tinka which is presented as jaded and emaciated.

The character of Wamala as carved from the image of a typical politician who has lost favour with the reigning political elite is a particularly poignant image of masculine identity in state apparatus. As a former cabinet minister who has just been released from detention for his alleged involvement in a coup attempt on the Veteran (a reference to Amin) who is the Head of State of an imaginary African country, Wamala keeps complaining of how his freedom is meaningless especially because of his penury. He is even considering going back to the Veteran to plead for clemency as a way of trying to financially rehabilitate himself. However Tinka reminds him that he was lucky to have gotten away with a mere two-year detention instead of the firing squad. The mention of firing squads alludes to the ruthless death squads that ran riot during Amin’s

regime. Yet Wamala's continued blaming of the Yankees for his ouster echoes what former president Milton Obote and his allies did, when they kept blaming their downfall on certain enemies who were working with foreign powers to eliminate them (Mutibwa 79).

The figure of a troubled woman as an allegory of the nation is even more emphatically deployed by Ruganda in one his most philosophically engaging plays titled *Black Mamba*. Namuddu, a semi-literate wife of a houseboy, Berewa, is persuaded by her husband to join him at his white master's house to, allegedly, assist him with his chores as a means of enabling the couple to get rich fast. However as events unfold, it becomes evident that Berewa has duped his whore-loving employer Professor Coarx to have his wife sleep with him in exchange for money. Though his wife is reluctant at first, Berewa manages to convince her to offer herself to Professor Coarx to extort as much money from him as possible. The following conversation between them captures the extent to which Berewa rationalizes his act of literally 'pimping out' his wife as a way of ensuring what he calls "progress" and "prosperity" (12).

NAMUDDU: How you talk! Berewa, do you really love me? How can you lend me away to another man?

BEREWA: I am not lending you to anybody. You are mine. Every fly knows that you can't help being mine. But then necessity obeys no law.

NAMUDDU: Now I know what you are after—one of these town girls. That is why you have had to lend me to your master. How I hate him! How I hate you!

BEREWA: If I wanted another woman I wouldn't have called you here.

NAMUDDU: That's not the point.

BEREWA: Then the point is that is that you must talk sense. You must see things exactly as they are. We must prosper—that is important! (*Black Mamba* 9)

Interestingly, Berewa uses the promise of modern consumerist rewards such as good dresses and shoes as a way of convincing his wife to sleep with his boss against her will. Ironically, even after she earns her first hundred shilling payment from the encounter with Professor, Berewa insists that he should be in charge of the finances and "he must bank it straight away" (*Black Mamba* 8). Her protests about the need to get herself good high-heeled shoes, a necklace, ear rings and a hand bag so as to look like Namatta are ignored by Berewa who keeps insisting that there is plenty of time to earn more. Namuddu continuously protests that sleeping with her husband's boss is immoral and not the "right way" (12) of helping her husband to get rich fast but Berewa retorts:

BEREWA: And what is right about being poor? What is moral about sweating oneself to death for only one hundred shillings a month? I don't see why you are weeping, Namuddu. We have got to use what we have. And what we have got is your body and mine. Those are our major sources of income as things stand now. If God expects us to use our blessed bodies he wouldn't have given us the bloody brains to think how to use them; nor would he have had us poor like this.

BEREWA: We can't be blamed for giving what the rich want, when we have

the chance. The Professor here is infatuated by your good looks. We must praise the Gods on high for showing us the way to get our daily potato. (*Black Mamba* 12-13)

The readiness with which Berewa is willing to let his wife peddle her flesh for monetary gain smacks of moral decadence and utter selfishness. At first she thinks it was a one-off incident but when Berewa keeps egging her on to extract as much as possible from the professor, Namuddu realizes that her husband means business.

The situation between Namuddu and her husband is a mirror of the political context in Uganda during Amin's time. More importantly though, the character of Namuddu and especially her body is a cogent social metaphor that Ruganda employs to explain the Amin era. On the one hand, the masculine deprivation and mercantilistic instincts that propel Berewa and Professor Coarx to think of Namuddu's female anatomy only in terms of capitalistic gains and sexual gratification respectively, offers a summation of the crass levels of moral and social decadence during Amin's rule. This oppressive gesture by Berewa speaks volumes, not just about the moral decadence of the society depicted in the play, but also about the sense of desperation and levels of abject poverty that seem to propel a man to dispense with his moral sensibilities for the sake of quick material gain. The sense of betrayal that Namuddu feels at her husband's decision to misuse her sexuality for money is symbolic of the brutality and systematic violence that Amin's henchmen visited on hapless citizens. The betrayal of Namuddu by her husband is as debasing as it is dehumanizing and callous. The despondency and helplessness that Ugandans felt as they constantly remained at the mercy of a brutal state apparatus is similar to what Namuddu feels as she is compelled by her husband to sleep with his boss for money.

Although the events depicted in the play are not peculiar to that period in time, the fact that the play was initially performed to full houses at Makerere University, Main Hall, at a time when Amin's tyranny was at its peak points to its social relevance then. The harsh economic realities then made many Ugandans resort to desperate measures. But at the centre of this desperation is the troubled female body which remains an index of dire hopelessness. Initially Ruganda appears to be painting the image of Namuddu as a sexual object instead of an agent contesting masculinized oppression and hence falling into the same trap as Negritude of projecting women as objects of the male gaze. Namuddu, however, redeems herself and her feminine agency by confronting and telling off both her husband and Professor Coarx towards the end of the play.

For a man to resort to lending his wife for money is a clear demonstration of hard economic times. Yet we cannot rule out the fact that the despondency and poverty that was occasioned by Amin's regime could have pushed many to the edge of literally mortgaging their own bodies for survival and engaging in "necessary pieces of drama for the hungry times" (*Black Mamba* 70). Thus Berewa's indecent proposal to his wife and

Namuddu's predicament might be read as symbols of the desperate circumstances then.

But in *The Floods* John Ruganda is more upfront in his exposition of the political events during Amin's rule. Unlike in the two plays discussed above, in *The Floods* characterization and dramatic deployment of themes and plot are all directly informed and inspired by events in Amin's Uganda. The story line of the play revolves around two characters—namely Bwogo, a prominent member of an imaginary dictatorial elite, and Nankya, who is a pseudo-intellectual. The so-called State Research Bureau that Bwogo heads is in fact a government terror outfit whose sole purpose is to eliminate enemies of the state. *The Floods* is conveniently structured into three closely-knit waves, with each one symbolizing the escalation of conflict and confrontation between the two protagonists. For instance, at the very beginning a headman is frantically trying to mobilize citizens to vacate an island (most probably in Lake Victoria) in order to avoid “floods.” The government has announced over the radio that people should evacuate from the island because there are looming floods. However, a recalcitrant fisherman called Kyeyune refuses to heed the call because he senses a trap. As the drama unfolds, it becomes evident that all the island dwellers that were duped into getting onto boats so as to be saved from the floods were shot and drowned in the lake by SRB boys. It also becomes increasingly clear that Bwogo had initially planned to have Nankya and her mother killed on the same boats despite having had an intimate relationship with her before. Throughout the play, Bwogo and Nankya are constantly at odds as they strive to claim the moral high ground in relation to the country's dictatorial regime:

BWOGO: The cat and rat game we are indulging in. Let's cut it out. It's becoming dangerous.

NANKYA: You started it. We are not half-through yet. Let's drive it to very end, however bitter, you said.

BWOGO: (*accusing voice but delicately*) Did I now?

NANKYA: (*aggressive*) Didn't you?

BWOGO: (*half apologetic*) In the heat of the moment, maybe. Effective prodding and needling did it. You made your point.

NANKYA: So did you. Loud and clear. Wasting no punches. Hitting where it hurts most. (*The Floods 35*)

From the above extract, it is clear that their romantic relationship is deployed and sometimes turned upside down, even if subtly, to explain the predicament that the Ugandan nation faced during the harrowing years of Amin's rule. With her mixture of pain, anxiety, suspense and resilience, Nankya is portrayed as a symbol of the Ugandan nation. She is depicted as both vulnerable and resilient in the context of male subjugation. Although Bwogo accuses her of “sleeping” (*The Floods 84-85*) her way to academic prominence, she also reminds him of the ruthlessness of the killer squad (SRB) which he heads. The treacherous character of the killer squads is even reiterated by Kyeyune when he recounts how he discovered a human finger while eating fish. Even more horrifying is the incident when

Kyeyune witnesses the massacre of the islanders in the rescue boat which reminds him of an incident when he fished out a dead body of a brigadier with three nails in his skull and genitals in his mouth. This chilling experience is reminiscent of the treacherous and callous activities that were undertaken by death squads at the height of Amin's tyranny. Sadly, as in *The Floods*, it was mostly the poor, women and children who were the main victims.

In what sounds like a prophetic conjecture, the contrived ending of *The Floods* appears to anticipate the overthrow of Idi Amin in 1979. In the play, the female character Nankya is instrumental in luring Bwogo to the house on the island, which eventually makes it easy for the coup plotters to catch him. Nankya is not as naïve as Bwogo had imagined her to be. She is not a mere sexual object and hapless pseudo-intellectual. Rather she turns out to be self-consciously perceptive about her own feminine powers and uses them to the fullest. As the play ends, Nankya is the centre of anticipated change. In a way the mother trope as configured by Ruganda through Nankya in *The Floods* is packaged into both an oppression and liberation symbol for the Ugandan nation; much like what Stratton refers to as the "whore-mother" symbol (41).

### The Trope of the Subversive Female and the Re-imagination of the Nation

The idea of the subversive female as a metaphor of the nation is not new in African literature. Indeed in many cultural discourses masculinity is regarded as representative of authority while femininity is subjugated subjectivity. While men are proud to regard women as emblematic of nationhood, in practice women are often marginalized. In many ways therefore the troubled mother figuration of nationhood can only redeem itself by being subversive enough to confront patriarchal authority. Emmanuel Yewah has argued elsewhere that for many African writers

[w]ho are disillusioned by broken promises independence, betrayed by postcolonial rulers who have appropriated national discourses, conscious of dictators' human rights abuses within their imagined sovereign space, have turned their creative endeavours into weapons to challenge, indeed deconstruct 'any signified' that could correspond to the nation. (68)

Nonetheless the mother trope as a reading of nationhood is underpinned by fractures and contradictions. Tom Nairn adumbrates this same point when he says that the post-colonial nation has been named the "modern Janus and its development inscribes progression and regression, political rationality and irrationality" (qtd. in Hutchinson 307). He adds that the "ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its conceptual indeterminacy; its wavering between vocabularies; the comfort of social belonging ... [and] the injuries of class" (qtd. in Hutchinson 307). This fluid figuration of the nation has persistently been circulated in African literary works of the post-colonial period. Because of the political upheavals that have faced many African countries like Uganda it is

understandable that many critics tend to read and write the nation as ideologically tenuous and slippery.

The Idi Amin era in Uganda is a specific epoch that was so traumatizing to the soul of the nation that it remains one of the most sorrowful eras which has consistently been used to define and re-imagine Uganda's nationhood. Ruganda's deployment of female characters clearly gestures towards a re-engineering and rebirth of the Ugandan nation amidst the trauma of Amin's era. Most of his female characters are symbolically projected as subversive protagonists who defy the patriarchal systems of governance that are run by men. In *The Burdens* for instance, Tinka refuses to be pushed down by her husband as she subverts the male stereotype of women as helpless by picking up the challenge to change the course of things. Despite the family's dwindled fortunes, she takes up the role of the family's sole bread winner through weaving mats and selling *enguli*, an illicit local gin, to feed the family.

Meanwhile, both Wamala and Tinka compete for the attention of their children as they frequently seek to influence them against each other. But Tinka's tenacity and resilience is even more evident. When Kaija confesses to her about what his father told him about her, she is quick to counter the accusation with more vehement counter-accusations against Wamala. Consider the following excerpt, for instance:

KAIJA: That you kept pulling him down and down. A millstone round his neck, he says. A big burden.

TINKA: He has never been up, Kaija; I want you to know that. Never been really up. As high up as men like Isaza, or Isimbwa. A lamb is not a lion, son.  
(*The Burdens* 6)

In a bid not to be outsmarted by her husband, Tinka seeks to regain the upper hand by seeking favour with their son. Tinka is not about to allow her husband to poison Kaija's mind against her and she is more than ready to paint the picture of Wamala as a failure who is solely responsible for the family's fall from grace. This blame game and contest for their children's attention between man and wife sometimes degenerates into physical confrontations. In one particular incident, Wamala injures her in a scuffle over a bottle of *enguli* which he had stolen from Tinka's hidden place outside their house. In a role play, Tinka who assumes the character of Vincent Konagonago, taunts and dismisses Wamala's puerile ideas of a 'Slogan Syndicate' and 'Two Tops' safety match sticks. In this play-within-a play scene, Tinka is not just foregrounding and rehearsing what Wamala should expect when he goes to meet Mr. Konagonago, but she also uses the opportunity to perform feminine power and poke fun at his shattered ego. In a subversive kind of way, Tinka seems to be reminding Wamala that he is no longer on top of things because of his impoverished status and lack of financial capital. For instance, while in the character of Konagonago, she reminds Wamala that he is only a poor man whose economic powers have diminished. The following extract best illustrates this.

TINKA: I don't do business with penniless little men.

WAMALA: They are the backbone of this ... They would favour Two Tops matches.

TINKA: They are the burden we have to carry. They idle away the day waiting for manna to drop from heaven of the men who've sweated ... (*The Burdens* 57)

While the above extract is a mere role play, Tinka doesn't spare any opportunity to indirectly lampoon Wamala's habit of wasting a lot of time on "idle" small talk as if "waiting for manna from heaven." Her haughty dismissal of Wamala's ideas is subversive so to speak, and Wamala is stirred into a rage as he starts calling Mr. Konagonago names like swindler. The role play is a reflection of the real tension in their lives. In the context of their own marriage, it is not lost on the reader that Ruganda uses this dramatic technique as an interventionist strategy of deploying subversive female power. While Mr. Konagonago is used to dismiss Wamala's infantile ideas, in real life Tinka is actually subverting the patriarchal power hierarchies by chiding him as "a penniless little man" "waiting for manna to drop from heaven." It suffices to infer that Tinka as the mother figure is in fact confronting and subverting masculine power as wielded by her husband. Within the project of women symbolizing the nation, Tinka's actions are emblematic of how oppressed female voices strive not to merely be muffled objects of the nation but to be drivers of the nation's destiny.

But what is evident from the physical and psychological mind games is that Tinka refuses to be subordinated and submissive to her husband. She subverts the archetypal figuration of a wife as a timid mother who has to diligently acquiesce to everything from an abusive husband without fighting back. Indeed Tinka throws the gauntlet at Wamala's feet, always refusing to be downtrodden and oppressed. Although she understands their dilemma as a family that was once well-to-do, she still defies the male stereotypical notion of women always taking the blame for every failure in society. As a typical mother she is caring and concerned about the welfare of her children (for instance her concern for Nyakake's frequent cough and her promise to buy Kaija a pair of shorts and his own bed) but she is quite militant and impatient with her husband who splurges his meagre earnings on alcohol and women. For example, she warns Wamala on his lecherous ways thus: "I am going to kill that bitch of yours, I warn you. I will pluck out her squinty eyes. She is making all of us suffer" (*The Burdens* 26). Aware of her husband's "illicit intimacies" (*The Burdens* 72) Tinka confronts him about it and doesn't take it lying down. In a way she is a mother and wife who refuses to be subservient and submissive. Although she complains about her husband's irresponsible behaviour and how it affects the plight of the family, she goes out of her way to take up the challenges and seeks pragmatic solutions. However she also finds out that militancy rather than care is the best way to articulate her desire to protect her children. Her impatience with her husband is one such case of

trying to protect her children. Sadly, Tinka fights with her husband, stabbing him to death. Overall, her motherhood subverts the patriarchal definition of a mother who is supposed to take everything lying down.

While the character of Tinka in *The Burdens* is a social metaphor of the Ugandan nation, she is also a symbol of the subversive female that is a source of hope and regeneration. For one, her suffering emanates from the fact her husband has been deposed from his former privileged position. As she weaves mats and sells illicit gin to eke out a living, the husband is drinking away his problems at the bar. This suffering mother/wife motif can be transposed onto the national context to depict how Amin's masculinized dictatorship was too immersed in its own tyranny, oppression and killings at the expense of the suffering citizenry. Incidentally Wamala is good symbol of the masculine state apparatus, although he has fallen out of favour because of regime change. But on the other hand, the suffering masses as symbolized by Tinka confront the abusive and negligent father figure of the nation-state. In a way, the killing of Wamala by Tinka can be interpreted as the symbolic slaying of an oppressive tyranny that is projected as masculine. To a certain extent the character of Tinka is portrayed as creative but also destructive, life-enhancing but also life-terminating, which is contradictory so to speak and subversive to a large extent.

From a misogynistic point of view, Berewa in *Black Mamba* looks at his wife's body as commercial merchandise that can quickly be commodified into a source of fast riches. Professor Coarx for his part only appreciates Namuddu as an object of sexual pleasure. The reality though is that she values herself and understands the power of her sexuality. Ultimately, she does not allow her husband and the professor to misuse her and get away with it. In the last scene she stands her ground and confronts both of them. The dramatic tension and irony is heightened when Berewa is forced by the turn of events to declare to the police officer and to all present that in fact Namuddu is his true wife. He even confirms this to the sceptical arresting officers by producing a copy of their marriage certificate and family photos. Overall Namuddu's character is a vivid figuration of the Ugandan nation. The alacrity with which the male characters appropriate her body for either capitalistic ends or sexual pleasure speaks directly to how the Ugandan national soul was defiled and indecently misused by Amin's tyranny.

Yet Namuddu still demonstrates a sense of subversion and resilience by not merely defying the masculine naming and stereotyping of her character as vulnerable. She subverts and confronts the masculine subjugation apparatus that is represented by her husband and Professor Coarx:

NAMUDDU: You may take the rags you bought me, the tattered shoes and everything that you gave me—but you will not get a cent of this money. You can go on raving for a whole year and slap me as many times as you wish, but you will not get this money, the money I got out of my own sweat. (*Black Mamba* 51).

But in her defiance of Professor Coarx's sexual exploitation, Namuddu is even fierier as she confronts him:

NAMUDDU: Do you think because all women you have been bringing in and sending out are prostitutes, Namuddu is also a prostitute? Don't go on calling me a prostitute, Mwalimu, while you don't know who I am. ... Do you think just because you are white and learned, everybody else doesn't matter? Do you expect us to spread out our garments to cover up your lust? Why don't you do the right things, if you have any prestige at all? Why do you have to regret after sucking all the pleasures? (*Black Mamba* 55)

Clearly, Namuddu is not taking her exploitation (both from her husband and Professor Coarx) lightly. She maintains her conscience and self-pride despite her denigration. Thus, her portrayal can be read as an iconic signifier of a Ugandan nation that was determined to keep rising even after being defiled, exploited and literally mortgaged away by a masculinized Amin tyranny. Her temerity and tenacity as she takes on her tormentors is as symbolic as it is subversive in the Ugandan context of the time.

But for Nankya in *The Floods*, her role as an agent of change is embedded in her character construction as an intellectual who is quite immersed in issues of feminism. Although she is projected as a pseudo-intellectual who literally sleeps with the oppressor, at the end of the play she stands out as a beacon of hope. Nankya also cuts the image of a Janus-faced trope of femininity which has many slippages and contradictions in terms of understanding a nation. Indeed it is characters like Nankya who help Ruganda to explore the complexities and multiple points of views associated with postcolonial African dictatorships. While she is certainly subversive in her persistent attempts to confront and resist repression, the fact that she was once Bwogo's girlfriend raises questions about the moral flipside of fighting tyrannies. At the end of the play though, she is clearly the icon of a new national rebirth solely because of the pivotal role she played in the removal of Boss's dictatorship by duping Bwogo into being arrested by the coup leaders.

### Conclusion

In all of Ruganda's plays discussed above it is evident that the female body appears to be configured in line with discourses of the natural body identity of motherhood. Yet the same bodies dramatically inscribe dominant social norms or the 'cultural arbitrary' of a new motherhood trope upon themselves. In this analysis we have witnessed how Ruganda's deployment of three female characters—namely Tinka, Namuddu and Nankya—captures the roles of different classes of women in the social configuration of the nation. While Namuddu is depicted as a rural woman who has to grapple with the anxieties of capitalism when she visits her houseboy husband, Tinka is a typical figuration of a fallen politician's wife struggling to come to terms with her new station. Nankya on the other hand is an intellectual woman who, incidentally, has to face similar

circumstances like the rest of the women in a patriarchal setting. To understand these processes of corporeal inculcation on the female characters in the three plays, I examined how their various identities are dislocated and repackaged within the agency of social power and the reconstruction of the new Ugandan nation. All three characters, I have argued, are stock representations of the reality in Uganda during Amin's time.

To underscore Ruganda's gender figuration of his female characters as social metaphors of the Ugandan nation, I have briefly sketched out the historical events of the Amin era, which informed his works. Through this analysis the article has, hopefully, shed light on how social power is constructed as masculine and affirmed by equally masculinized state apparatus, which has to be constantly confronted, challenged and subverted by the feminine, weak and oppressed as symbolized by the mother figure. In a sense, the Mother Africa symbol in many literary texts in Africa (but more specifically in Ruganda's dramatic texts) signifies masculinist states that have to be feminized in order to arbitrate on the conflicting national identities in post-independence Africa. The three plays discussed here are subversive because on the surface they seem to speak to women's vulnerability and powerlessness yet, at the same time, they celebrate women's resilience and ability to stand up in the face of unabated patriarchy. The female characters continually voice their insignificance and helplessness in the nation of men with a hope that they will bring about a change in the status quo. Ruganda's dramatic intervention helps highlight the subversive and sometimes contradictory representation of female characters, not just in patriarchal society but in one that is under a violent dictatorship. Through his works he has demonstrated how gender relations intersect with politics, morality and dramaturgy in an attempt to understand the Ugandan nation.

#### Works Cited

- Alden, Patricia. "New Women and Old Myths: Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and Nuruddin Farah's *Sardines*." *Matatu* 8 (1991): 125-45.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005.
- Hutchinson, John, and Anthony D. Smith. *Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88.
- Kawadwa, Byron. *The Song of Wankoko*. Trans. John Kalema. Kampala: Ministry of Culture and Community Development, 1976. Trans. of *Olunyimba lwa Wankoko*. 1971.
- Kiyimba, Abasi. "The Ghost of Amin in Ugandan Literature." *Research in African Literatures* 29.1 (1998): 124-38.
- Konrad, James. *Target Amin*. London: Sphere, 1977.

- Kyemba, Henry. *A State of Blood*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1977.
- McGee, Patrick. "Texts between Worlds: African Fiction as Political Allegory." *Decolonizing Traditions: Views of Twentieth Century "British" Literary Canon*. Ed. Karen Lawrence. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1992. 239-60.
- Mbowa, Rose. "Theater and Political Repression in Uganda." *Research in African Literatures* 27.3 (1996): 87-97.
- Mutibwa, Phares. *Uganda since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes*. London: Hurst, 1992.
- Nazareth, Peter. *The General Is Up*. Toronto: Tsar, 1984.
- Osinya, Alumidi. *The Amazing Saga of Field Marshall Abdula Salim Fisi (or How the Hyena Got His!)*. Nairobi: Joe and Transafrica, 1977.
- Ruganda, John. *Black Mamba*. Nairobi: East African Educational, 1973.
- . *The Burdens*. Nairobi: Oxford UP, 1972.
- . *Covenant with Death*. Nairobi: East African Educational, 1973.
- . *Echoes of Silence*. Nairobi: East African Educational, 1986.
- . *The Floods*. Nairobi: East African Educational, 1980.
- . *Igereka and Other African Narratives*. Nairobi: East African Educational, 2001.
- . *Music without Tears*. Nairobi: East African Educational, 1982.
- Schipper, Mineke. "Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in African Literature and Criticism." *Unheard Words: Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America*. Ed. Mineke Schipper. London: Allison and Busby, 1985. 22-59.
- Soyinka, Wole. *A Play of Giants*. London: Methuen, 1984.
- Stratton, Florence. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Tacca, Alan. *The Silent Rebel*. Nairobi: Longman, 1984.
- Watkins, Leslie. *The Killing of Idi Amin*. London: Everest, 1976.
- Westlake, Donald. *Kahawa*. London: Allison and Busby, 1981.
- Yewah, Emmanuel. "The Nation as a Contested Construct." *Research in African Literatures* 32.3 (2001): 45-56.