

CULTURAL CONFLICT IN IMBUGA'S *THE BURNING OF RAGS*

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Francis Davis Imbuga (1947-2012) is the most significant Kenyan playwright and literature scholar. His name became popular with his works such as *Aminata*, *Betrayal*, *The Burning of Rags*, etc. which consistently deal with issues such as the clashes of modernity and tradition in the social organisation of African communities.

The Burning of Rags is a powerful dramatization of a cultural conflict that comes about when a traditionalist father holds hard and fast to the old ways while his educated son appears to be at loggerheads with the ways of his forefathers. But, ultimately the son identifies himself completely with his father after his death. Thus, this is not only a play of cultural conflict, but also of inter-dependence of the two cultures – traditionalism and modernism. In this way,

The creative writers of Africa have a clear vision of the ideal society and they have stressed on the need to combine the best in the old cultural traditions with the enlightened ideas of the modern world.¹

The Burning of Rags is a two act play, scene one of Act One takes place in Agala's hut in the village. In his dream, Agala encounters the apparition of Matilda, his dead daughter-in-law. She complains that her son, Yona, is *dying to become a man craving for Initiation* (4). But the Initiation ceremony of traditional circumcision has not been performed by Yona's father, Denis, a university professor in Nairobi.

The action in the next scene takes place outside Agala's house. Agala wants Denis to come home to circumcise Yona in the traditional manner. But Denis writes to his father, expressing his inability to come to the village and perform the circumcision ceremony as he is busy with preparing his students for the examinations. When he feels it necessary that Yona should be circumcised, he will take him to a hospital in a few weeks' time. Agala grows furious and speaks about the age-long practices to Babu, the village story teller.

Yona will not be circumcised in any hospital while I live. I say it in broad daylight, he will not. The boy will be circumcised here. He will be circumcised by that same knife that worked on his forefathers. His warm blood shall trickle into the soil that now covers the bones of his ancestors. (11)

Babu, the other elderly character, emotionally supports the views of Agala on tradition. He also explains in details how the traditional act must be performed. He says that the father of the boy to be circumcised must be available for the "first washing of the wound. And only the boy's father should slaughter the white cock that will be used for the ceremony" (16). He makes it very clear that Agala's second son, Bandi, cannot perform the rites as long as Denis is alive. Finally, he declares that Denis must be made to come and do his duty to his son.

These words of the two village elders reveal their unfailing belief in their age-old traditional values and their firm commitment to get the circumcision ceremony performed in the traditional way.

The scene of action in scene three is Denis' room in Nairobi. It opens with Hilda, the girlfriend of Denis, dancing in response to the music from a cassette player. Denis tells Hilda

that he is leaving for his native place to help his father in settling a land dispute. Thus, he keeps Hilda in the dark about the purpose of his visit. From this, it is evident that Hilda does not know the fact that Denis is a widower and has a soon in his village.

Scene four of Act One also takes place in Denis' room. Henricks Fisher, an Afro-America friend of Denis, also a university lecturer, is seen engaged in conversation with Hilda. Their conversation reveals their past illicit association. Both of them fell in love with each other. As a result, Hilda became pregnant. On learning the fact, Henricks deserted her. Later, she became the mother of his son. Henricks now offers to marry her because they are *strongly bound by that child* (27). However, Hilda gently turns down his request saying that she is *deeply in love with Denis* (28) and expresses her hope that she can see the resurrection of her lost image. She pleads with Henricks not to let Denis know about their affair. These words show Hilda's honesty and pure love for Denis. However, Henricks rejects her love for Denis and threatens that he will initiate legal action against Denis for running away with his wife (Hilda), if she doesn't marry him. He says, *I will ensure it by hook or crook* (30). This shows the male-dominant and exploitative attitude of Henricks towards a helpless woman. This scene ends with Henricks granting four weeks' time to her for taking a final decision.

In scene five Act One, Denis and his father, Agala, are locked in a very serious argument. Agala says that Denis can go to Nairobi after Yona's circumcision but must come back after a fortnight for the final rites – burning of his own son's old clothes. But Denis seriously responds in negation. Agala warns him with dire consequences, if Denis leaves the final rites unperformed.

In scene six, it is given to understand that the circumcision has been completed. Denis, contrary to his argument in the earlier scene, agrees to come back to the village *for burning of the rags and the final washing* (43).

In scene one, Act Two, Denis is back in Nairobi. He found celebrating his birthday with his friend, Henricks, and his cousin, Dr. Agbale. Dr., Agbale reminds Denis of the sacred rite of the burning of the rags in connection with Yona's circumcision. But, Denis turns a deaf ear, terming the traditional activity as nonsense.

The last scene of action takes place in Denis' sitting room in Nairobi itself. Agala painfully narrates that Yona is as good as dead because the final rites of burning of the rags have been left unperformed by Denis. He urges Denis to rescue the boy by washing him *properly with the medicine before the day ends* (59). Hilda overhears the conversation and Denis is forced to disclose his past to her. Nevertheless, Hilda asserts her love for Denis. *I told you that I would rather dies than lose you* (61). Innocent Hilda believes that Denis will also forgive her because her past is *so strikingly similar* to that of Denis. She too reveals her love story: "I too have a child ... yes, also a boy (62)." Contrary to her expectations, Denis is upset and, in a fit of rate, mercilessly asks her to pack up her things and leave his room.

In the meantime, Henricks enters the scene, and the frustrated Denis leaves for the hospital to take care of his son, Yona. Henricks renew his offer of their reunion to Hilda. However, the moment Hilda reveals to him that she is expecting *Denis' baby* (67), he literally disappears from the scene changing his mind at once: "this is different now ... you and Denis ought to get married (67)." This only shows how women are placed in the most vulnerable and helpless position in a traditional society like that of Kenya. However, in the end, a reconciliation is brought about between Hilda and Denis with the sudden death of his father, Agala. As Denis says:

You see, Hilda, I know myself and I also know that you know me too. There is absolutely no way I am going to handle this on my own. And so I need you, Hilda. (69).

The play ends with the reappearance of Matilda's ghost.

The play begins at the native village of Denis and ends in Nairobi. Each of the scenes is bound by the thread of the theme of *culture clash* between tradition and modernity. Apart from the action, the song of the apparition of Denis' dead wife that pervades the play, contributes to the tautly-knit structure.

Nevertheless, there are some scenes in the play that do not contribute to the furtherance of action. For instance, the conversation between Hilda and Henricks in Act One, Scene four, regarding the way how Henricks manages to buy a train ticket is absolutely unnecessary as it neither throws a special light on Henricks' character nor does it reveal anything about Hilda. The whole scene of Denis' birthday celebration in Act Two is yet another example of this nature. The scene pushes action to a total standstill. However, this static nature of the tempo is compensated by the very next and last scene with the rapid movement of action culminating in the death of Agala and the reunion of Hilda and Denis.

The Burning of Rags is divided into two Acts. The plot of the play has two stories or two actions. The main plot consists of Agala's strong resolve to perform the traditional circumcision of his grandchild, Yona while Denis' association with his girlfriend. Hilda, constitutes the sub-plot. The two plots are nothing but the two different aspects of the main theme – cultural clash. The greatness of the playwright lies in his admirably blending the two plots into one harmonious unit in the end. The sub-plot is inter-twined with the main plot with the theme of cultural inter-dependence.

However, the plots are not built on gripping scenes of action. For example, Hilda's love affair with Henricks, which is a turning point in Hilda's life, is only made known through dialogue. One expects an emotional scene in the hospital, where Agala dies, but the death news is heard from Denis. This way the past events are recalled rather than represented on the stage.

There are also certain other improbabilities in the plot of the play. One is not convinced of the persuasions of Henricks to marrying Hilda, his former girlfriend, knowing well the fact that she has been living with Denis under the same roof. It is equally improbable that immediately after criticising Hilda for her becoming an unmarried mother to Henrick's child. Denis comes back to her saying, *I need you, Hilda* (69). The playwright should have created a reasonable situation with sensible characters suitable to bring about the change to convince the audience that the change is natural and reasonable. As a critic comments on the craftsmanship of Imbuga's plays: "One suspects that as may be true of Ngugi's plays ... They read rather better than they act Lack of experience in craftsmanship dearly inhibits Imbuga."² However, Vladmlr Klima's statement better explains the reasons for such simplified events and endings:

There is a denouement in most East African plays, but in some cases It is not well-made. The reason for this is not only the author's restraint end economy of wording, but mainly their efforts to resolve certain topical problems in the final parts of their plays.³

The entire story revolves round three major characters – Agala, the traditionalist, Denis, the representative of modernism and Hilda, one of the most modern women of Africa. In the play, all these characters come out with their views on tradition and the necessity of interdependence of tradition and modernity.

Agala, the guardian and conservator of tradition is determined to perform the ceremonial circumcision rites in the traditional way. He cannot tolerate the violation of *the ways of its forefathers* even in his dreams. When Matilda, the dead wife of Denis, appears in his dream and complains that she has circumcised Yona, Agala shudders at these words and cries madly “No. no. no. no You would have to castrate me first! ... I am done! I am finished ... I am nothing (4).”

The reason for his agony is that as per the tradition, circumcision must be performed by the father of the boy but not by the mother (a woman) as in the present case. Agala feels that circumcision performed by a woman is a deliberate violation of tradition. When Denis writes to his father that he will take Yona to a hospital for circumcision, Agala retorts “... I shall not have any of that little boy's blood splashed on the floors of anyone's hospital. No. The day I may not rule against such abuse of the dignity of our traditions here in my home. I will have become a night runner (17). Babu, the other traditionalist and story teller of the village, upholds the views of Agala and terms Denis' decision as “... the fault of too much book learning Such a clever boy to be spoilt with a hospital circumcision? (15-16).” These words of the two village eiders reveal their unflinching faith in their age-old traditional values, their duty to the ways of their elders and their strong resolve to get the circumcision ceremony performed strictly in the traditional way.

Agala and Babu stand in total contrast to Denis. The two elders are the staunchest supporters of their age-long practices, while, “Denis reflects the dilemma of the intellectual who has abandoned his indigenous values and become traumatized by Western ones.”⁴

Denis in his letter expresses his unwillingness to perform the traditional rites under the pretext that his students need maximum coaching for their final examinations. In the same letter, he gives an impression that he is not fully against the tradition when he says that he will take Yona to a hospital for circumcision. After his arrival at the village, he forgets his own proposal and attends the circumcision ceremony at his own house. Just before the circumcision, he refuses to come back to the village for the final rites. He says “that is practically impossible ... I will not be here for the burning of the boy's rags. Surely anybody can preside over that (38). But after sometime, surprisingly, he tells his father that he will go and return for the burning of the rags and *the final washing*. However, he doesn't return to the village as promised saying; “No. I don't believe in the practice (47).” He terms the ceremony as nonsense. This way Denis appears to be on the side of his people and his tradition, but the very next moment, he seems to be alienated from his native culture. Thus. Denis is seen as a weak hero, paralysed by indecision.

This kind of behaviour of hesitation and inaction on the part of the hero has made him fail to take a right action at the right point of time. Perhaps this has prompted Martin Banham and Clive Wake to comment that Imbuga's under-graduate plays are dramatic flaws. On the other hand, John Ruganda rightly observes that this is one of the technical devices imbibed by Imbuga from *oral tradition*. It is also the result of his quest for an authentic dramatic technique of his own breaking away from the European literary mainstream.

However, this sort of typical conduct of Denis appears to be natural as he is equally influenced by his tribal traditions, inherited from his parents and by the Western culture, derived from his education. Thus, the oscillation of Denis between the two cultures serves as the ground for the synthesis of the two cultures at the end. Denis continues to behave in the same fashion till the end of the play. After his tether's death, he returns to Hilda, whom he has almost abandoned, repenting for his verbal assault on her. Here, one is reminded of Remi, the protagonist in Ngugi's *The Black Hermit*, when he repents for the death of his wife “... I never gave you a

chance. Nor even tried to understand you. I came back to break tribe end custom. Instead, I've broken you and me."⁵

Hilda, in this play, comes to us as one of the most modern women of Africa. Educated in a Christian school, she derives more enjoyment out of Scottish dance than from any other native dance form. She is Denis's girlfriend saving with him like a wife outside the bond of marriage. In times of crisis, she is practical and bold. She is not much upset when she suddenly learns that Denis is already married and has a son. She is convinced by the explanation of Denis about his marriage and she reminds him of her words "Didn't you believe me at all when I told you that I would rather die than lose you? (61)." She does not hesitate to term their background as *so strikingly similar* and reveals her dark past to Denis. But Denis cannot tolerate that she is already an unmarried mother. He abuses her because she is in love with a man. Hilda like a firm post, boldly retorts "Denis, do not belittle yourself with that kind of pedestrian talk. Why don't you also give me a chance to explain the circumstances? There is no way you and I can forget each other, however much we try" (64). Even after revealing that she is heavy with his child, Denis furiously orders her to leave his room. Thus, in spite of her unfailing devotion, deep love and strong persuasions, she falls to win him back. The cruel and arbitrary conduct of Denis evokes sympathetic ethos in the audience for Hilda.

The dramatist has succeeded in bringing about a conflict in the mind of Hilda. She is not agreeable to her marriage with Henricks, her former lover. She begins Henricks not to wreck her hope of a better future with Denis by revealing to him about their love and their child. However, Henricks doesn't head to the helpless lady's words and tells that he will ensure their reunion *by hook or crook*. Finally, he threatens her with filing a case against Denis for running away with his wife, if she doesn't marry him. Thus, Hilda is torn between the devil and the deep blue sea. She is thrown into a state of unbearable anguish and confusion. Even then, her love for Denis is unshaken. She shouts at Henricks "How very unkind of you! Have you no regard for Denis? (30)."

The symbols, used almost in every scene in the play, are certainly in keeping with the mood of the characters and the theme of the play. In the very first scene *the two drums expressing conflict with each other* (1) draw our attention to the presence of persons with diametrically opposed views towards life and things. Naturally, this is suggestive of the cultural conflict between Agala, a traditionalist and his son, Denis, a university professor. In Act One, scene six, the stage setting with the *diversity of night noises produced by night birds, dogs, different types of drumming, frogs, and humans* (41) symbolises the utter confusion and indecision of Denis regarding the traditional circumcision of Yona. *The Owl, an ill-voiced bird* symbolises the ominous future to Agala. The medicine bag with *roots, leaves, two old shirts, and old pullover and a bunch of bananas* (68) is suggestive of the native tradition.

Above all, the song, *From Home with Banana*, which pervades the play intensifies the banana symbolism which is suggestive of interdependence of two culture. It is believed that in some African traditions one cannot be recognized as a family man until he has a banana plantation. Interestingly, old Agala's banana plantation has a mango tree, a foreign tree, associated with the Western culture.

The playwright uses sophisticated language for the characters which are urban-based and educated. For instance, the conversation between Hilda and Denis, who are well educated, reflects the language which is expected of such characters. The proverbs and sayings – *do not talk all of your neighbour, he may be under your seat* (12), *the nose that sits above a dry throat doesn't let a small pass* (12), *words spoken on a dry throat do not roll off the tongue* (14), *sweep*

your own house before you point out the dirt in another's (38) – give the language the native colour.

It is to be understood that Hilda is the representative of modernity. Denis' reunion with Hilda signifies interdependence of cultures. This sudden development in the last scene is interpreted by Imbuga himself as

The victory at the end is neither Denis' nor Agala's. It is victory of the notion of the interdependency of men and women, the interdependence of the cultures, so that each case is uniquely different from the next.⁷

Thus, it is sufficiently clear that the idea of interdependence of cultures is more evident in the few words of Denis and in the playwright's interpretation of a single incident, than in the action of the characters.

However, as a socially conscious writer, he portrays not only the contemporary problems realistically, but also he has something to say, a message to deliver. This he does through Denis, who identifies himself with his father symbolising integration of the two cultures – native and alien. As David Cook puts it “the socially conscious writer does not set to work in a vacuum but urges his society from what it is towards what it might be.”⁸

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