

**Unpacking The Burdens of Mental Health and Trauma: An Exploration of John
Ruganda's 'The Burdens'**

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Abstract

This paper examines the depiction of mental health and its effects on characters as portrayed in John Ruganda's play, "The Burdens". It delves into the complexities of mental health, weaving a powerful narrative around the downfall of a minister, Wamala, and the subsequent burdens his family endures. While the play doesn't explicitly use the term "mental health," it portrays a moving struggle with depression, anxiety, and disillusionment through Wamala's character, his wife Tinka and their children's struggle with mental health. This paper unpacks the multifaceted burden of mental health in "The Burdens," analysing its manifestations, the impact on the family unit, the absence of support systems, and the influence of societal pressures. Referring to trauma studies and performance studies, this paper examines the underlying psychological struggles of the characters in the play and how the playwright uses language to heighten the message on mental health and trauma. Through a close reading of the text, this paper unpacks the complex interplay between individual suffering and the broader social and cultural factors that contribute to the burden of mental health. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how literature can serve as a powerful tool for exploring and addressing mental health issues especially in this wave of sensitising the world about the need to be mentally healthy.

Keywords: *Mental Health, Depression, Disillusionment, Trauma*

Introduction

Mental health is a global crisis with far-reaching implications. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) underscores the increasing prevalence of mental health disorders

worldwide. Factors such as past traumas, sexual assault, rapid urbanization, globalization, and social media have contributed to rising rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. Despite growing awareness, stigma surrounding mental health persists, hindering access to treatment and support services. Moreover, disparities in mental health care exist across countries and socioeconomic groups, with low- and middle-income countries often bearing the greatest burden (WHO, 2022).

In Uganda today, mental health awareness and services remain limited. Stigma surrounding mental illness creates a significant barrier to seeking help (Ssebunyane et al., 2014). Despite Uganda's history with violence, displacement, and social injustice, the mental health consequences for its citizens remain largely unaddressed. Awareness regarding mental health can be shared using social media, newspapers, radios, televisions, among others. The other convenient and rather direct way is using Literature in form of oral literature, drama, novels and short stories. Literature, with its power to illuminate the human experience, serves as a crucial platform for exploring such an intricate issue. Literature has often served as a powerful medium for expressing and processing traumatic experiences (Felman & Laub, 1992). By sharing traumatic experiences and how the characters overcome them in the texts, literature has the power to educate the masses about mental health.

John Ruganda is one of the most influential playwrights to emerge from East Africa. Born in Uganda in 1941, his plays offer a mocking critique of post-independence African society, focusing on themes of corruption, power, and societal decay (Mutiso, 2010). Ruganda's work is characterized by its satirical and often humorous approach to addressing serious social issues, making his plays both entertaining and thought-provoking. His plays, such as "The Floods," "The Burdens," and "Echoes of Silence," depict characters grappling with the psychological trauma of living in a society marked by political instability, corruption, and violence. They have become staples in the study of African literature and drama (Ogude, 1994).

In particular, John Ruganda's "The Burdens" explores the psychological difficulties of societal pressures and personal loss through the lens of Wamala, a fallen minister, and his family. This paper examines how Ruganda's play represents mental health and trauma, highlighting the ways in which the characters manifest symptoms of psychological distress

and the underlying causes of their suffering. It also examines how the playwright heightens and showcases mental burdens in the play.

Literature Review

Regarding mental health and literature elsewhere in the world, a recurring theme in Asian literature is the portrayal of mental illness as a consequence of social pressures and familial expectations. Studies by Park (2009) and Tsuge (2009) explore the psychological toll of rigorous academic systems and filial piety on characters' mental well-being, Kim (2018) explore the portrayal of mental illness in Korean literature influenced by the legacy of the Korean War, and Mbembe (2001) examine the lasting psychological effects of colonial violence and exploitation on African communities.

Imbuga (1999) in what he calls 'trends and circumstance in Ruganda's drama', identifies Ruganda's major target of criticism to be the political leaders whom and he blames them for the exploitation of the poor. They are considered selfish and merciless that they are willing to do anything to remain rich at the expense of the poor. Additionally, Peter Nazareth (1980) refers to Ruganda as 'an invisible teacher who uses drama to comment on disintegration and corruption in the post independent societies.' Ruganda's plays centre on the post independence challenges faced by Ugandans ranging from social, economic, cultural to political. Therefore, majority of studies done on Ruganda and his plays make general analysis of the playwright's major areas of concern like exploitation, disintegration of moral values, social justice, political and domestic conflicts, among others. Mbabazi (2002) offers a general introduction to Ruganda's work, highlighting his critique of authoritarian regimes and social inequalities. While Huggins (2011) explores the role of performance and activism in Ruganda's plays. While scholarly attention to Ruganda's work is growing, a deeper analysis of his portrayal of mental health and trauma remains largely unexplored thus the purpose of this paper.

Theoretical Framework

Firstly, trauma theory is focal in understanding mental health issues. It delves into the social, political, and historical contexts that shape individual and collective experiences of trauma (Caruth, 1996). Guided by tenets like understanding the type and source of trauma, struggling to appear normal and transferability of trauma, we are able to explore how violence, political and social injustices contribute to the prevalence of mental health struggles by the characters

in the play. Secondly, performance studies is used to explore the power dynamics inherent in theatrical performance and reception (Schechner, 2003). By examining the main tenet of this theory as language use shows how Ruganda uses language to foster mental health issues, we can understand how they contribute to raising awareness and challenging the stigma surrounding mental illness. Whereas critical trauma theory provides the foundation for understanding the psychological impact of violence and social injustices on characters, performance studies shows how Ruganda's play portrays these experiences.

Literary Methods

This qualitative study which explores experiences, meanings, and social phenomena through methods like interviews, focus groups, ethnography, and document analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was used to analyse the play 'The Burdens' by John Ruganda which was selected purposively for its richness in the human trauma triggering experiences lived. Textual analysis is a broad term encompassing a variety of research methods used to describe, interpret, and understand the meaning of a text (Lazarus, 2009). It was used to highlight the underlying causes of mental health and trauma issues and how the playwright depicts them. Close reading was mainly used as the method of data analysis. Close reading, often referred to as close analysis in literature, is a meticulous method of examining a literary text. It delves deeper than simply understanding the plot or surface meaning, focusing on the specific details and techniques employed by the author to create meaning (Tyson, 2006).

The Weight of Loss and Disillusionment

The play explores the devastating impact of loss and disillusionment on an individual's psyche. Looking at Wamala, a once-powerful minister who experiences a dramatic fall from grace, a former minister who cannot at this point in the play afford food for his family let alone a decent house to live in. At the beginning of the play, it is stated that they live in a semi permanent house with simple furniture. As the play proceeds, we see Kaija requesting to have a different bed from Nyakake who wets the bed and the lack of basic needs. Tinka says, '...You don't seem to realize that that paraffin in this house is as hard to come by as everything else'(Pg.2) Wamala's loss of power and status is a central catalyst for his emotional unravelling. The play underscores the psychological toll associated with such a dramatic shift in fortune. It's not merely the loss of material possessions or social standing that afflicts Wamala, but also the loss of identity and purpose. The man who was once revered

and respected is now a marginalized figure, struggling to find meaning in his life. It is no wonder he comes up with business ideas that are washed up and unrealistic let alone consuming too much alcohol that he can not stand up straight. This loss of self, coupled with the disillusionment of a political system he once believed in, creates despair and anger that gradually consumes him.

Tinka on the other hand is seen wearing a 'I have been through hell' face at the beginning of the play. Her disillusionment is seen through the contrast between her view on love and marriage and the harsh realities she encounters as a wife and a mother. Tinka is consistently betrayed by Wamala who comes home wet "as a sponge and carrying odour of illicit intimacy". She has to distil alcohol and sell it in order to make ends meet and instead of being appreciated, she is reduced to domestic violence and taken for granted. In a heated moment, Wamala smashes the distilling apparatus as he taunts her to shoot and then grips her neck to strangle her, almost choking her to death (Pg, 61). It is no wonder she kills him as revealed at the end of the play.

Ruganda's portrayal of this family's descent is crucial because it highlights the psychological consequences of political and social upheaval. It's a reminder that the human cost of societal change is often profound and far-reaching. By focusing on the individual rather than the abstract, Ruganda gives a face to the many who experienced similar disillusionment during Africa's post-colonial era. The play thus invites us to consider the psychological burden of those who, in the pursuit of power and influence, find themselves on the wrong side of history. It is a testament to the enduring human capacity for hope and resilience, even in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Manifestations of Mental Distress

While the play doesn't overtly diagnose the characters with a specific mental health condition, it vividly portrays a range of symptoms consistent with conditions such as depression and anxiety. One prominent manifestation of Wamala's distress is his increasing reliance on alcohol. As his circumstances deteriorate, he turns to substance abuse. He says that, 'I drink and drug myself against depression and frustration' (Pg. 25). Alcohol becomes a coping mechanism, a temporary escape from the crushing weight of his burdens. This aligns with self-medication practices documented in studies on depression (Hasin et al., 2018) as a

coping mechanism often observed in individuals struggling with mental health issues (Kessler et al., 2010).

Wamala's withdrawal from social interactions and family life, characterized by isolation and apathy, further underscores his deteriorating mental state. These behaviours align with common symptoms of depression, such as social withdrawal and loss of interest in activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). He is continually isolated from his children as they grow closer to their mother. Kaija in particular is very close with his mother as he runs errands and keeps her company until late in the night. This isolation is a manifestation of mental distress. This withdrawal not only isolates him from potential support systems but also creates a communication gap with his family, hindering their ability to understand and potentially help him (Beach et al., 2014).

Moreover, Wamala's outbursts of anger and irritability reflect the volatile nature of untreated mental health conditions. These outbursts are directed primarily towards his wife, Tinka, creating a tense and volatile atmosphere within the household. He resorts to using abusive language and violence. In a play within a play, Wamala attacks his own son thinking he is the police but Tinka shows him that it is only Kaija and Wamala jerks to a stop. While anger can sometimes mask deeper emotions like sadness or fear (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), Wamala's inability to express his vulnerabilities effectively strains his relationships and highlights the challenges faced by individuals struggling with mental health issues (Gottman & Gottman, 2007).

As a result of failing to deal with the mental distress the characters encounter, Wamala and Tinka resort to day dreaming. Ruganda uses memory as a way of escape for the characters from their unpleasant situations. Instead of working out issues with Tinka, Wamala turns to day dreaming about the past happier times, early courtship days, how their relationship started and later to how they lost all their wealth. They both remember how easy life was before they lost it all:

Tinka: Shopping at the supermarket over the phone.

Wamala: Business deals done at the intercontinental

Tinka: The hair dresser coming home. (The Burdens Pg.41)

On another occasion, Wamala has to be stopped by Tinka when he wears a borrowed suit, he day-dreams about talking at a rally. Whereas memory is used as an escape for the two, it is such a short-lived experience that leaves exactly where they started from.

Finally, Tinka continuously blames Wamala for all the trauma in her life. She blames him for having extramarital affairs and often refers to him as a child. She also blames him for their family's downfall. Wamala, also blames Tinka for being a milestone around his neck and pulling him down. He says, 'she dragged me down' (Pg. 6). This projection and blame game instead of taking accountability for the actions is another manifestation of mental distress.

The Ripple Impact on the Family Relationships

The play illustrates the devastating ripple effects of an individual's mental health crisis on the family unit. The head of the family Wamala, a former minister whose decline into alcoholism and isolation profoundly impacts his wife, Tinka, and their children Kaija and Nyakake. Firstly, Wamala fails to uphold his family. A once well-to-do family now falls to grass and can not afford basic needs. Kaija and Nyakake share a bed, the family fears that the latter might have tuberculosis, and so as to survive, every member of the family is clutching on straws as they grapple with life's challenges.

Secondly, the children in "The Burdens" are deeply affected. Exposed to their parents' constant tension and their father's erratic behavior, they experience a disrupted childhood. Kaija often comes to separate his parents whenever a fight erupts. In a dreamlike situation, Kaija seems to have seen his mother murder his father. The children's sense of security and emotional well-being is compromised as we realise at the end of the play, that they are to be taken to an orphanage as their mother is arrested. Tinka pleads guilty and states, 'I realized I had been right, so I stormed in... and it happened' (Pg, 73). Such traumatic experiences lead to long-term psychological consequences (Bowlby, 1988). Therefore, Ruganda's portrayal of the family's disintegration underscores the systemic nature of mental health crises, highlighting how individual suffering can reverberate through entire families and communities.

The emotional toll on Tinka is particularly noteworthy. She shoulders the responsibility of maintaining the household while contending with Wamala's emotional volatility. Her attempts to communicate with him are often met with resistance or anger, leaving her feeling helpless

and frustrated. She is overwhelmed by the fact that she has to pick up the pieces and provide for her family while her husband is out galivanting. It is no wonder she uses verbal and physical violence. She says, 'I am going to kill that bitch of yours, I warn you. I'll pluck her squinty eyes' (Pg. 26). The play subtly suggests that Tinka might also be experiencing mental health burdens due to the cumulative stress, a phenomenon known as compassion fatigue (Figley, 2015).

Complicacy is seen as another way that the family unit is affected. Often times, Tinka says she is living for her children, not herself or her husband's sake. This is a sign of disillusionment and as a result, she undermines Wamala's domination which often causes tension between the couple. Tinka's role transitions from supportive wife to primary caregiver as she grapples with the financial strain, emotional labour, and practical challenges of managing a household with a mentally deteriorating husband. This role reversal is a common theme in narratives exploring the impact of mental illness on families (Gilligan, 1982).

While the play primarily focuses on the disintegration of the Wamala's family due to his mental and emotional decline rather than extramarital affairs, infidelity still plays a part in showcasing the effect of mental health burdens on the characters in 'The Burdens'. Tinka continuously complains about her husband's infidelity and this accumulated hunger can be seen as one of the reasons she eventually ends his life.

Domestic violence is evident in the play as seen between Tinka and Wamala. The couple is always at loggerheads as seen in one of the dialogues in Act 2:

TINKA: Give me back my drink.

WAMALA: Hide it in hell next time.

TINKA: You are not going to have it.

WAMALA: If you gag my throat.

TINKA: You should be ashamed of yourself.

WAMALA: After I have drained the bottle. (She catches up with him. A scuffle. She is hurling insults at him and administering feeble blows)

TINKA: You pig! You parasite! Filthy fool! Skunk! Porcupine. (They are tagging at the bottle ... Tinka falls with a moan. Big clatter as the kyanzi, kitchen ware, and spear scatter. She hurts her elbow)

WAMALA: You deserve it, you idiot

From the above dialogue, the domestic violence depicted is both physical and psychological in nature. Neither of them respects the other and it appears that they use violence to wash away their frustrations.

The Absence of Support Systems

Another yet clear burden portrayed in the play is the absence of adequate support systems for individual characters grappling with mental health challenges. The play suggests that traditional support structures, such as family and community, while essential, may be insufficient in addressing the depth of Wamala's crisis. As a father, society expects him to be a provider for his family and when he fails to do so, his wife Tinka, a representative of the whole society accuses him of not doing enough. She says, 'Next time, ask him innocently of course, Father! Do old mothers buy beds for their sons, pay school fees for their children and... Poll-tax for their husbands?' The expectation of stoicism and resilience in the face of adversity can hinder individuals from seeking help or acknowledging their vulnerabilities. This cultural pressure to maintain a strong outward appearance can further isolate those suffering from mental health issues.

The play also suggests that traditional support systems within the community might be inadequate to address complex mental health challenges. While family members are present, they seem unable to offer Wamala the kind of support he desperately needs. The biggest assistance offered by his wife is in form of nagging and fighting. When he brings a bed for his son Kaija, Tinka remains indifferent and hurls complaints, 'we are fed up with second hand things' (Pg. 18). It is also revealed that when Wamala's fortune was running out, all his close relatives disappeared. This lack of comprehensive support systems underscores the importance of creating accessible and culturally sensitive mental health resources (Uchegbu, 2014).

Societal Pressures and Masculinity

The play, through the character of Wamala, a fallen minister, exposes the weight of societal roles and the devastating consequences of failing to meet these expectations. The character of Wamala is emblematic of the societal pressure placed on men to be providers and protectors. His descent into alcoholism and isolation can be seen as a direct response to his inability to fulfill these traditional masculine roles. The play highlights the toxic masculinity that often underpins societal expectations, where seeking help for mental health is seen as a sign of weakness (Connell, 1995).

Furthermore, Ruganda critiques the emphasis on material success and social status as markers of worth. Wamala's fall from grace is a stark reminder of the precarious nature of power and the devastating consequences of its loss. The play suggests that the pressure to maintain a certain image can contribute to immense psychological distress when that image is shattered.

The play subtly explores the role of societal pressures, particularly those related to masculinity, in exacerbating Wamala's mental health struggles. Seeking help for mental health issues might be perceived as a sign of weakness, a notion often associated with traditional notions of masculinity. This societal pressure might prevent Wamala from acknowledging his struggles and seeking the support he needs. Wamala's character embodies the traditional African masculine ideal of the provider and protector. However, his downfall and subsequent descent into alcoholism and isolation expose the fragility of this constructed masculinity. The play suggests that the pressure to conform to these roles can be a significant source of stress and can contribute to mental health issues (Connell, 1995).

The Role of Language and Symbolism

John Ruganda masterfully employs language and symbolism in "The Burdens" to illuminate the complexities of the human experience and the societal ills he critiques. Through carefully chosen words and evocative imagery, he constructs a powerful narrative that resonates with audiences on multiple levels.

Ruganda's use of language is instrumental in conveying the emotional depth and psychological turmoil of his characters. His choice of words, sentence structure, and dialogue contribute to the overall atmosphere of the play, reflecting the characters' inner states. For instance, the use of repetitive language or fragmented sentences can mirror the disorientation and confusion experienced by characters grappling with trauma or loss.

Symbolism is another key element in Ruganda's dramatic repertoire. The play is replete with symbols that carry multiple layers of meaning. For example, the character of Wamala, a fallen minister, can be seen as a symbol of the collapse of post-independence ideals. The burdens carried by the characters, both literal and metaphorical, represent the weight of societal expectations, personal failures, and the complexities of human existence. "The Burdens" by John Ruganda is through the title itself. The "burdens" referred to in the title can be interpreted to represent the various challenges and issues faced by the Wamala family, including marital problems, financial struggles, and social pressures. By using the concept of "burdens" as a metaphor for these issues, Ruganda is able to explore these complex themes in a way that is both poetic and meaningful. Another example of symbolism in the play is the use of objects such as the traditional Ugandan drum, which is often used as a symbol of cultural heritage and identity. These symbols help to create a rich and layered narrative that allows Ruganda to delve into complex social issues and explore the struggles and triumphs of the characters.

Ruganda's use of language and symbolism is crucial in conveying the psychological states of his characters. His dialogue is often fragmented and elliptical, reflecting the disjointed thoughts and emotions of individuals grappling with trauma. The use of metaphors and symbols, such as water in "The Floods" and shadows in "The Burdens," further reinforces the characters' internal turmoil and sense of despair.

Play with a play

Conclusion

Ruganda's "The Burdens" offers a poignant exploration of the complex interplay between individual psychology and societal forces in shaping mental health experiences. By delving into the lives of the Wamala family, the play illuminates the devastating consequences of mental health struggles, both for individuals and their families.

Wamala's character serves as a powerful representation of the psychological toll of societal pressures, loss, and disillusionment. His reliance on alcohol, withdrawal from social interactions, and volatile behavior are manifestations of underlying mental health issues. The absence of adequate support systems aggravates his suffering and contributes to the overall breakdown of the family unit.

Tinka, as the primary caregiver, exemplifies the resilience and strength often demanded of women in such circumstances. However, her own mental health is also impacted by the strain of caring for a struggling family. The children, caught in the crossfire, experience the traumatic effects of their parents' turmoil.

Ruganda's skillful use of language and symbolism further enhances the play's exploration of mental health. By employing techniques such as fragmentation, symbolism, and metaphor, he creates a powerful and evocative portrayal of the characters' inner worlds.

Ultimately, "The Burdens" is a call to attention for the pervasive issue of mental health in society. It highlights the need for greater understanding, support, and destigmatization of mental illness. By examining the complexities of individual and familial struggles within a broader social context, the play offers valuable insights into the human condition and the importance of addressing mental health challenges.

While this study provides a foundation for understanding the mental health dimensions of "The Burdens," further research is needed to explore the specific cultural and historical contexts that shape the characters' experiences. Additionally, comparative analysis with other African plays that address mental health could offer broader insights into the representation of mental illness in African literature.

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