

THE ELDERLY IN AFRICAN DRAMA AND THEATRE REPRESENTATIONS AND PRACTICES

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The curiosity around old age, in my view, is not embedded in the process of growing old in itself, but rather in the impact of the process on the body and, of course, the unthinkable: death. Old age has always been the preoccupation of humans irrespective of gender, occupation and social status, making it an ambivalent phase in life. This ambivalence could be read into the notion that understanding old age is culture-oriented and, most of all, that it is socially constructed.

My Habilitation research analyses the role of the elderly in African societies, with a focus on knowledge production, wisdom and transformation as they are articulated in a selection of African drama and theatre texts. Namely: Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1965), Sankie Maimo's *Sov-Mbang the Soothsayer* (1968), Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* (1974), Guillaume Oyono Mbia's *Three Suitors One Husband* (1975), Benedicta Muffuh's *The Rebel* (1980), Bole Butake's *Lake God* (1986), Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* (2006) Mesgun Zerai's *The Village Dream* (2006), Julius S. Spenser's *The Patriot* (2009), and Bill Marshall's *Asana* (2013).

The project further investigates the perceptions and representations of the elderly in these texts, exploring how they respond to colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial presence and implication in the plays. The research also employs these texts to investigate prejudicial practices against the elderly, which are predominant in implicit and explicit ageism. Most importantly, the project focuses on how the perception of old age and growing old affects both men and women in some of the literary productions, based on socially constructed gendered notions.

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* is pivotal to the evaluation of gender discourse and old age in the research. The persona of OLD WOMAN in the play immediately draws critical attention to the

description of her body which unapologetically informs readers not only about her wrinkles, but also of her shrunken skin that is losing its firmness. Contrarily, OLD MAN is projected as a calm and serene character who comes across as a sage. He narrates the historical past of this community and performs rituals of invocation and propitiations to the gods and ancestors, encompassing female deities. Specific ways of visualising the aged female body in Antjie Krog's collection of

*"it is true that I saw three women
naked on the beach at Marseilles
their bodies like three
bags of wrinkles their hair
like tissues in the wind."
"it is true" by Antjie Krog, 2006*

poetry, *Body Bereft* (2006), are a valuable contribution to the research in terms of chronological aging. One of the poems in this collection titled *it is true*, speaks about the imminence of old age. The speaker in the poem offers vivid descriptions, which project images of three naked women on a beach at Marseilles that, similar to *Anowa*, anchor on the subject of the fading female body reflected in terminological associations suggestive of decline and pessimism.

What constitutes one of the questions that my research seeks to address is the ideological supposition that one could draw from these perceptions in order to contribute to the theory of old age as the elderly interact with urbanised and indigenous African societies, African history, politics and gender relations. The representations and perceptions of old age in African literary studies is an innovative field of critical inquiry in African literatures.

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PhD in Drama and Theatre Studies from the University of Bayreuth. Her research foci are intervention theatre, African drama and theatre, theatre criticism, postcolonial literatures, critical theory and the representation of old age in African literature.