Trauma Beyond Narrative: *Maria Kizito* and the Postdramatic Representation of Genocide

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Abstract

Erik Ehn's *Maria Kizito* dramatically digs deep into the complexities of trauma, memory, and complicity within the context of the 1994 Rwandan genocide by focusing on the story of a catholic nun accused of taking part in the massacre. Drawing on Hans-Thies Lehmann's theory of postdramatic theatre as developed in his seminal book of the same title, this research paper critically examines how the key characteristics of this unconventional theatrical form are employed in the play. As such, the present paper explores how Ehn uses fragmentation, silence, non-linearity, physicality, and juxtaposition to indulge the audience in the ruptured and haunting reality of the genocide trauma. The playwright breaks away with the conventional linear structure and homogeneous composition of drama as laid down since the time of Aristotle, employing instead fluid time sequence, cyclic plot structure, fragmented language, and potent symbols to communicate the fractured nature of the traumatic memory. Through breaking the fourth wall and getting the audience in direct contact with the actors, Ehn aims to position the audience as witnesses to the trauma with all its complexities. The theatre is, therefore, transformed into a space of moral reflection where the audience are invited through the unresolved questions they face and the discomfort they feel to engage actively with the moral ambiguities of genocide. The main objective of this research paper is, then, to position *Maria Kizito* as a prototypical example of how postdramatic theatre, in contrast to conventional theatrical forms, can effectively address the inexpressible dimensions of trauma associated with genocide through engaging the audience with profound, unsettling moral questions about faith, humanity, and complicity.

Key Words: Erik Ehn, Maria Kizito, Trauma, Rwandan Genocide, Memory

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Erik Ehn's 2004 play, *Maria Kizito,* digs deep into the horrors of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 via dramatizing the story of a Catholic nun, Maria Kizito, accused of participating in the killing of approximately 7000 people who sought refuge in her abbey during those tragic events. The play attempts to theatrically represent the moral complexities of the trauma and memory of the mass violence during which almost 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered brutally at the hands of Hutu extremists. The ethical, psychological, or religious motives that make a woman of religion like Kizito participate in such atrocities are investigated and, on a much deeper level, the questions of faith, morality, and guilt are brought into dramatic focus.

The Rwandan genocide was the culmination of a long history of ethnic conflict between the majority Hutus, poor and powerless, and the minority Tutsis, rich and powerful, which was augmented in 1994 by the assassination of the Hutu president. between April and June of the same year, thousands of people, mostly Tutsis and moderate Hutus, were killed viciously at the hands of radical Hutus. All types of weapons were used in massacre: guns, machetes, axes, knives and, in some cases, victims were burned alive. Children and women were no exception; kids were killed mercilessly in front of their mothers and women were tortured and sexually assaulted before being killed. Almost all Hutu classes were involved in the carnage, including civilians, armed militias, and even religious figures. Severe criticism was directed to the Catholic Church in Rwanda for its role in the massacres as many members of the clergy were then accused of participating in genocide either directly or indirectly. Maria Kizito and her superior Sister Gertrude Mukangangwa were accused of taking part in the carnage by

supplying gasoline to the Hutu militias to burn alive the Tutsi refugees who had sought protection in their monastery. As such, priests and nuns, who were supposed to be the symbols of mercy and the guardians of God-granted lives, turned into monstrous killers, while the motives beyond their deviation from their true roles are still under investigation by many institutions, including literature.

The moral dilemma of the participation of Maria Kizito in the ethnic cleansing acts is at the center of Ehn's play. Kizito was tried before an International Belgian Court in 2002 for taking part in the carnage in several ways: reluctance to provide food and protection for 7000 Tutsis who sought refuge in her convent, preparing lists of their names and submitting them to the militias, reporting their hiding places for their killers, and, more shockingly, providing gasoline for burning them alive. The play, hence, investigates a profound ethical dilemma, i.e., how can a nun, supposedly responsible for preserving life and curbing violence in the hearts of others, participate herself in the unspeakable cruelty. In other words, Ehn attempts to engage the audience in deep reflection on Kizito's motivations, her psychological state, and internal conflict, if any, between religious commitment and ethnic loyalty. Although the play presents the nun as directly implicated in the 1994 atrocities, it leaves open the question of whether she is wicked by nature or a mere victim of the circumstances around her. Ehn, thus, invites the audience to consider the deep and complicated relationships between individualism and collectivism, human fragility and religious devotion, and personal responsibility and social obligation.

Due to the profound traumatic experience and sophisticated moral dilemma at the heart of *Maria Kizito*, the playwright employs an unconventional theatrical form, postdramatic theatre, to effectively convey these themes. Postdramatic theatre, as theorized by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his seminal book *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999), is a kind of theatre that departs from the conventional forms of narration and representation of classical theatre towards more experimental ones. Opposite to the traditional Aristotelian model of

drama with its linear plots, escalating conflicts, well-developed characters, and realistic forms, postdramatic theatre stresses fragmentation of experience, non-linearity of plots, and distortion of language. In this way, it echoes the complexity of contemporary human experience with its fragmented memory and sophisticated motives as Lehmann argues (27). The emphasis of postdramatic theatre is not, therefore, on creating a homogeneous fictional world in which every minute detail fits in its place, but rather on experimenting with language and form to create an open theatrical experience that resists traditional interpretation. The main objective of this paper is, therefore, to critically demonstrate that Ehn's *Maria Kizito* exemplifies postdramatic theatre by breaking away from traditional dramatic structures towards fragmented experience, disjointed language, non-linear plot, physicality, and symbolism with the aim to disrupt the audience's expectations, engaging them actively with the unresolved moral ambiguities surrounding the trauma of Rwandan genocide.

In his *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann defines this theatrical form as one that does not rely on the dramatic text as the primary source of meaning in drama or the most important element in it. "Postdramatic theatre," he writes, "refers to theatre after drama. Despite their diversity, the new forms and aesthetics that have evolved have one essential quality in common: they no longer focus on the dramatic text" (1). Rather, it gives way to a more democratic approach to theatre in which the text retreats to be just one element of the performance while other elements - music, space, symbols, movements, and visual imagery - take equal importance, if not more. In this sense, postdramatic theatre comes in harmony with the postmodernist movement in the late 20th century that challenged the coherent narratives and realistic representations of life. Instead of presenting a well-made plot with clearly sketched characters, postmodern theatre presents fragmented, non-linear, and disjoined experiences that are difficult to interpret or connect. The focus is on the performance as a whole with its juxtapositions and fragmented

language rather than on a moral lesson or a predetermined message intended for the audience. Shuchi Sharma and Mitali Bhattacharya argue that the new form of theatre is based on open-ended structures that are characterized by a "focus on the performative and visual aspects of theatre rather than a structured narrative" (17). In postdramatic theatre, therefore, stage design, props, lightening, music, and body movements take precedence over coherent dialogue and homogenous text. Lehmann argues in this regard that the visual elements are key to the process of generating meaning in drama, complying with "the twentieth century historical shift out of a textual culture and into a 'mediatized' image and sound culture" (Jurs-Munby 1). Instead of depending mainly on dialogue for conveying meaning, theatrical productions use gestures, postures, eye-contact, and rituals to communicate additional layers of meaning that require daring interpretations. The rationale beyond is to create a dramatic space in which the audience interact with all experimental elements of the performance to generate meaning, rather than receiving it passively.

The disruption of the conventional character-actor-audience relationship is also an important feature of postdramatic theatre. In traditional theatre, actors are supposed to typically present the written characters with no opportunity for direct contact with the audience in any way possible. In postdramatic theatre, however, the direct link between the actor and the character is disrupted as the actor can break the fourth wall and speak directly to the audience or have eye contact with them. In her introduction to *Postdramatic Theatre*, Karen Jurs-Munby notices that, "There is also a deliberate blurring between the characters … and … performers themselves as they address the spectators and let them know they know they are being stared at and are returning the gaze" (6). An actor can also shift roles throughout the performance by playing more than one character. Lehmann argues that in some modern texts "language appears not as the speech of characters – if there still are definable characters at all – but as an autonomous theatricality" (18). The fluid nature of the characters/actors in postdramatic theatre debunks

the traditional stability of meaning in the dramatic production and invites the audience to interact with the ever-changing identities and meanings in the text/performance.

In postdramatic theatre, the homogeneity and centrality of language as the basic means of communication and the carrier of meaning in a literary text is transformed. Lehmann highlights the shifting role of language in postdramatic theatre from being an expressive channel of a stable meaning to fragmented utterances that suit the fluid nature of postdramatic productions and the disintegration of contemporary life at large. He writes, "The formal languages developed since the historical avant-gardes have become an arsenal of expressive gestures, which in postdramatic theatre serve as theatre's response to changed social communication." (23) In other words, language has become an end in itself that attracts attention to the beauty of its disruptions, disjointedness, and overlapping. Phrased differently, the dialogue in a play may seem fragmented to evoke a certain emotion or create a certain situation rather than advancing conflict or developing characters. Even pauses and silences in post dramatic theatre are exploited purposefully to "create spaces for the audience's reflection, often allowing the inexpressible to manifest itself." (123) The use of language in this sense goes with the postmodern tendency to cast doubt on the capability of language to convey meaning or represent human experience truly. This tendency, in its turn, aligns with the attitude of postdramatic theatre to distribute focus in a dramatic performance on more than one element, including, but not restricted to, sensory and visual modes of expression and, therefore, elicit the audience's engagement on more than one level.

Time and space have also received special focus in postdramatic theatre. The two concepts are often exploited cleverly to produce dramas that do not stick to the traditional time sequence of a well-made play or the special relationships on the stage. In post dramatic theater, Sharma and Bhattacharya argues, "Time does not follow any linearity very much like stream of consciousness" (19).

Theatrical productions may, therefore, prolong time through long periods of pauses, silences, or repetitions that deconstruct the audience's expectation of a progressive, linear narrative. The concept of place has also altered in postdramatic performances where actors move in unconventional ways on the stage or occupy unusual positions throughout the performance. In extreme cases, the fourth wall is destroyed and the boundaries between the actors and the spectators are blurred where direct contact occurs and the audiences become active participants in the production. In postdramatic theatre "the gap between actor and audience is quite close. The performance space gives primacy to the participation of the audience as well. The concept of fourth wall witnesses a huge shift in this case" (Sharma and Bhattacharya 19). The destabilization of time and space in a dramatic production alienates the audience from identifying with the characters as they are always aware of their location and experience and, hence, can be aware of the meanings they make.

Finally, the role of the audience in postdramatic theatre has become much active, compared to its role in traditional theatre. "The theatre performance," Lehmann maintains, "turns the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium into a joint text" between the audience and the actors (17). Rather than being passive recipients of meanings in the Aristotelian theatre model, they are now dynamic participants in the process of making meaning as they are invited to engage with the performance on a multiplicity of intellectual and sensory levels. Lehmann stresses the idea of "co-presence" where both the audience and the performers share the same experience at the moment of the production of play. The open-endedness of postdramatic performances with their fragmented language and recurrent pauses and silences give the audience a great opportunity to engage actively in the process of making their own meaning. Laura Edmondson elaborates the key role given to the audience in postdramatic productions and relates it to Ehn's theatre as follows: "Rather than seeking to promote healing and reconciliation through theatre, the mission … is to carve out a site of

witnessing for the transformation of ourselves. And this, Ehn suggests, is a version of activism" (47).

Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of postdramatic theatre, thus, makes a radical shift from the conventions of traditional theatre as laid down by Aristotle to a form of theatre is based mainly on the concepts of fragmented experiences, circularity of plot, disruption of dialogue, and shifting roles of characters. It opens new horizons for the audience to get rid of the passive role assigned to them throughout history towards a much more active role based on sharing experience with the performers and interpreting the broken dialogues to make meaning of the whole piece. Jurs-Munby argues that "The spectators [have] become active co-writers of the (performance) text. [They] are no longer just filling in the predictable gaps in a dramatic narrative but are asked to become active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making" (6). By marginalizing the consistent dramatic text and focusing, instead, on the visual, spatial, symbolic, and experiential dimensions, postdramatic theatre highlights the ambiguity and sophistication of the contemporary human experience and invites spectators to share the same experience or, in other words, feel empathy with what the performers present on stage.

Within the framework of the main tenets of postdramatic theatre discussed above, Erik Ehn's *Maria Kizito* could be analyzed. In one of his interviews, the playwright maintains that the play is "an experiment in form," hinting at the postdramatic nature of the play (Ehn, Writing can be torn up). Arguing in the same vein, Lawrence Goodman claims that Ehn "is arguably one of the most experimental American playwrights now working." Emphasizing the experimental nature of the play conforms with the general principles of postdramatic theatre: "Postdramatic theatre allows for greater artistic experimentation, enabling theatre practitioners to explore a wide range of forms, styles, and techniques (Sharma and Bhattacharya 20).

Maria Kizito is part of a challenging dramatic project of 17 plays by Erik Ehn, namely *Soulographie*. The series attempts to dig deep into genocide worldwide, including that of Rwanda, Uganda, and Central America among others. The project is not just meant for being a creative piece of literature that only entertains, but as a daring mission that aims to provoke the audience into assuming an active role towards the atrocities of genocide by bearing witness to what happened and reflecting on the motives beyond. By avoiding direct expression, straightforward language, linear plots, and well-defined characters in favour of fragmentation of language, distortion of linearity, inclusion of symbolism, and exploitation of silence, the playwright attracts the attention of the audience to the fallibility of the traditional modes of expression in presenting the trauma of the Rwandan genocide. Emphasizing the unrepresentable nature of the genocide trauma with all its sophistication and complexity incarnates a postdramatic approach where the playwright does not provide the audience with clear-cut answers to their inquiries about the motives and intentions, but rather let them experience the haunting effects of trauma itself. Through connecting *Maria Kizito* to the wider context of the *Soulographie* series, the writer highlights the interrelatedness of world traumas in the sense that genocide, though different from one context to the other, is the same regarding the moral issues and ethical ambiguities it raises, hence the universality of trauma and the necessity of a postdramatic/posttraumatic theatre to give it full articulation as Amber Karlins suggests:

> Can a posttraumatic theatre exist? I believe it can, but not under the guise of traditional theatre. To successfully create a posttraumatic theatre, the playwright and the production team must employ techniques of the avant-garde and the postmodern. The play must avoid realism and be fearlessly experimental. An excellent example of this kind of theatre, one that uses this type of creativity to translate the effects of posttraumatic cinema into the theatrical realm, is Erik Ehn's *Maria Kizito*. (84)

In his pre-note to the play, Ehn writes that "*Maria Kizito* doesn't seek to explain the source of the genocide or to fix blame. It attempts to enter into the inner life of a perpetrator" (178). By stating as such at the outset of the play, the writer aims to inform the reader from the very beginning that the play is not meant to explore the socio-political context of genocide or to assess the involvement of certain political groups or religious institutions in the acts of violence; rather, he highlights the fact that the play is a mere study in motivation of the different parties that participated in the atrocities by trying to raise questions that require deep reflection: "In what did these nuns … believe? What was the architecture of their inner prayer space? With what kind of God were they intimate" (178)? Ehn's aim is, therefore, not to accuse the nuns or justify their deeds, but to let the audience bear witness to what happened over three months in 1994 and reconsider issues of faith, collectivism, and ethnicity through looking deep into the personal conflicts and emotional struggles of the main character. This introspective approach that focuses on the internal conflict, rather than external events, creates a sense of discomfort for the audience who are confronted with uncomfortable questions that need deep thought about human nature and individual responsibility at the time of crisis. Laura Edmondson calls this sense of uneasiness that the painful questions generate the "aesthetics of discomfort," which she explains as "a phrase that helps to capture the way that the sublimity of the play's language and imagery intertwine with the graphic realities of atrocity" (qtd in Mueller 82).

Maria Kizito does not follow a progressive narrative line that complies with the Aristotelian prescription of a well-knit plot; rather, it navigates forward and backward in time, juxtaposing scenes from Maria's trial in Belgium, Teresa's commentary on the trial, scenes from the massacres that took place in 1994, and sections of rituals and prayers. Places also change continuously, including, but not restricted to, America, Rwanda, and Belgium. The fluid nature of time and space in the play is postdramatically

employed to reflect the fragmented self of the protagonist and the complex, incomprehensible nature of the trauma itself. Shifting timeframes and places continuously and abruptly create a dazzling effect on the spectators, who are left struggling with their attempts to engage with the complexities of trauma, memory, and intrigue. The abrupt, and sometimes shocking, transitions from Maria's trial to the real events of genocide and vice versa are meant to make the readers grapple with understanding the real motives beyond Maria's involvement in the bloody acts despite her religious status. In the first scene, for example, we are introduced to Maria, absorbed in prayer, as she recites a sentence that is repeated every now and then during the course of the play: "MY HEART IS A JERRICAN, A JERRICAN OF— A JERRICAN OF GASOLINE" (Ehn, Kizito 182). This image reappears more than once in the play in a way that reflects Maria's inner turmoil and deep sense of guilt. By likening her heart to a jerrican of gasoline, she suggests that in the recesses of herself there is a deep repressed sense of guilt that burns her soul and fragments her psyche. The metaphor mirrors the internalized personal trauma of the protagonist that could be the result of her profound sense of complicity in the atrocities. The repetition in the quote itself reflects Maria's struggle in her attempt to express her anguishing feelings and repressed remorse. On a different occasion, the heroine reads from Psalm 22, "My heart has become like wax, it melts away within. So wasted are my hands and feet that I can number all my bones" (184). In harmony with the first image, the prayer once again highlights the splintered self of Maria because of her unbearable traumatic memory. Likening her heart to wax suggests her internal fragility and powerlessness as if her heart is dissolving and weakening under the pressure of remorse. The second part of the quote indicates how internal senses of guilt and fear to confront her involvement in the butchery have affected her physical state as well, turning her into a weakened and boney body as if life has departed from her. The two former images suggest an overwhelming sense of pain that haunts both the body and soul of

the protagonist due to a repressed sense of guilt that feeds on her entire being.

In one of her speeches with herself, Maria says, “I will sit next to Brahms in a room made for breaking down and we will make sounds in our throats while the music plays. Glad! I’m glad they’re dead! I did not throw up once” (187). In this quote, Maria is depicted as struggling under the pressure of a complex mixture of emotions; she is on the verge of breaking down, but she prefers to sit next to Brahms and contemplate her deeds, her happiness, and her biological state which typically reflects her psychological one. The choice of Brahms, a German composer whose music is characterized by sadness and tranquility, is deliberately exploited by Ehn in this context to symbolize how Maria is in bad need for sitting alone with herself to reconsider her complicity in the genocide events. The “room made for breaking down” suggests a setting where one is with oneself, masks removed and defences lowered, where true emotions and actual feelings of contemplation, guilt, and remorse find safe outlet to express themselves. "Making sounds in our throats" without the ability to fully articulate them in actual words indicates the inability of language in its traditional sense to express the weight and heaviness of the trauma associated with the Rwandan genocide. Maria’s words, thus, mirror the size of the unspeakable tragedy in which she has played a central role, a tragedy that language in the conventional form stands helpless against expressing it. “In the context of genocide,” Chantal Kalisa argues, “language … disintegrates” (44), giving way to gestures, pauses, and silences to express what cannot be expressed in ordinary words.

The fragmentation of everything in the play mirrors the fragmented collective memory of the post-genocide Rwandan society at large. Ehn deliberately aims at indulging the audience into the traumatic experience by preventing identification with a linear narrative line. He wants them to get the experience of a fragmented memory that still, after many years of the actual tragedy, creates a

sense of discomfort and impossibility of full understanding for both victims and victimizers. The choice of a non-linear structure in his play is meant deliberately for reflecting the moral disintegration connected with the trauma and the impossibility of condemning one party or a group.

Central to the fragmented, non-linear structure of the play as a whole is the fragmentation of language itself. The language Ehn uses in the play is characterized by being disjointed, incoherent, and full of gaps and pauses. In his introduction to an interview with Ehn, Randy Gener describes the playwright's language as follows:

> His theater is a world of collapsing burst language, a collage of overlapping connections, pithy fragments and contrasting ideas that deliberately leaves gaps of understanding even as they spiral and expand into disjointed coherence. You might say that Ehn is a postmodernist par excellence. You might accuse him of being an obfuscating experimentalist. Both of which Ehn will probably embrace without flinching or becoming defensive. You might picture his theater as a kind of broken pottery in which any attempt to mend the smashed pieces can seem elusive, even impossible.

The aim beyond the use of disjointed language is to reflect the ruptured experience of characters and the fractured reality of post-traumatic Rwanda. Instead of advancing the plot or accelerating the conflict, language in *Maria Kizito* is used to reflect the inner chaos of the characters while struggling hard to fully understand the reality of their own trauma and to deal with their internal senses of guilt and remorse. As a result, language in the play comes disjointed, fragmented, and marked with sudden shifts of imagery to reflect the fluidity of meaning in the play. In this sense, fragmentation mirrors the disorienting effects of the genocide trauma on memory, both individual and collective, where reality and illusion, past and present, victim and victimizer overlap. Ehn's aim beyond the use of fragmented utterances and illogical juxtapositions is to make the audience contemplate the inability of conventional language to communicate the atrociousness and complexity of the

genocidal trauma; To give an example from the play would be more suitable in this context for conveying the inadequacy of language to communicate meaning in post-genocide Rwanda. Maria says:

> I have done what I was told. I have been told wrong things.
> I have imagined terrible things.
> I have behaved as if the world and my imagination were real, as real as each other.
> I have straddled wealth; walked over the dead.
> I have failed to envy the dead.
> I have treated the past as if it were real, instead of the past.
> I have hidden in fear instead of hiding in God.
> This century is a few centuries long.
> This century is an account of holes
> This century is a hill, no matter which way you walk: downhill.
> This century is an abdominal wall too weak to hold up the intestines.
> This century is skin carved instead of stone, stone carved instead of soil, soil carved instead of soul, soul butchered instead of sacrifice, sacrifice offered rather than known, knowledge rather than heaven, heaven rather than God, God idolized rather than God, God rather than God.
> Wouldn't snow be—Wouldn't snow be so much better? (218-219)

The above quote is a typical example of how fragmented language pervades the play, reflecting the incoherence of expression and lack of articulation in face of the traumatic reality. The repetitive nature of language in the previous quote reveals a continuing struggle within Maria' self between her humanity and ethnicity. Each line is a fragmented confession of a bitter memory that conflicts with other anguishing memories in the recesses of her

own psyche, leaving her prey to unbearable inner turmoil and destabilizing reality and truth in her mind. For Maria, both reality and illusion overlap in her vision and, therefore, there are no boundaries for her between the real world and her imaginations as she "behaved as if the world and [her] imagination were real, as real as each other" because she cannot distinguish between the horrors witnessed and those imagined. Maria's extended, multi-layer metaphors about time, "century is an account of holes," "a hill," wherever you go, you are going "downhill" represent the concept of time as hollow and history as empty and, therefore, resists any attempt to interpret or give meaning to it, in the same way the trauma of genocide is. In her words, "abdominal wall too weak to hold up the intestines," she suggests that the physical world, represented by the body, in addition to the spiritual world, have all disintegrated and cannot sustain themselves under the pressure of the genocide horrors; the language of the play, in its fragmentation and disintegration, is to reflect the collapse of the whole society with its values. The shattering of the whole system and the absence of a center that can hold is rather emphasized by the sequence, "This century is skin carved instead of stone, stone carved instead of soil, soil carved instead of soul, …," which builds a chain of images that marks the absence of solid structures and strong centers and, therefore, symbolizes the moral and spiritual disintegration that Maria feels all around her. Maria's final line, "Wouldn't snow be so much better?" represents a sudden jump in a desperate search for an alternative to all the ruins of humanity around her; the image underlines her loss of hope in a world whose ethical and spiritual values have deteriorated under the impact of mass killing and, thus, her hopes for purity and rejuvenation are aborted.

The style of disjointed fragments and juxtaposed heterogeneous structures throughout the play challenges the expectation of a stable, coherent self; rather, it presents the main character as torn between her human and religious obligations, on the one side, and her desire for committing to the collective consciousness of her people, the Hutus, on the other hand. The

broken use of language within the play does not only reflect the disintegration of Maria's character, but it also reflects a larger postmodern theme about the failure of language to communicate meaning at the times of traumas where words fail to represent the horrors of mass violence. Ehn maintains that "Trauma also needs the companionship of its own trauma language" (Writing Can Be Torn Up). The disjointed nature of language in the play, thus, turns it into a space open for divergent interpretations and stresses the overwhelming nature of trauma in which language stands unable to speak for the atrocities committed and the deep psychological scars inflicted by the experience of genocide.

Related to the postdramatic idea of the fragmentation of language is the use of extended pauses and silences throughout the play. The playwright uses silences and pauses deliberately as powerful postdramatic strategies for communicating the unspeakable nature of trauma and all tragic events related to it. Every now and then in the play, the dialogue and action are interrupted by short pauses and silences as if the writer likes to communicate how language is too fragile to express the actual events of the genocidal trauma experience. For instance, in an exchange between Maria and a refugee, she says, "If your mouth is full of words, how will you eat? (Silence.) If you won't tell me what you want, how will I know to feed you? Maybe you had better leave. Give me your name" (192). In this quote, the rhetorical question is followed by "silence" to convey Maria's struggle with language and words; rather than helping her to convey her thoughts clearly and communicate her feelings articulately, words stand as barriers against warm exchange and mutual understanding. The silence after the question in the excerpt worsens the atmosphere between Maria and the refugees as language fails to bridge the gap between them or generate reciprocal understanding or sympathy. As such, silence has two dramatic functions; for the protagonist, it gives her golden moments of withdrawal into her own fractured self to contemplate her choices, actions, and deep senses of conflict and

guilt. For the audience, it is meant to make them stop for a while with themselves and reflect deeply on the events to get to the core of the traumatic experience of genocide and understand how this experience has devastated the characters' sense of coherence and meaning. They are also made to feel the discomfort associated with these pauses to bear witness to the characters' deep suffering.

In the same way silences and gaps are employed in *Maria Kizito,* physicality takes precedence over verbal language. Gestures, postures, body movements, and facial expressions are, thus, used postdramatically in the play to reflect the psychological trauma and moral ambiguity of the characters. The physical presence of both perpetrators and victims on the stage signifies a sort of testimony to the horrors of genocide. Hesitation in movement or physical tension on the stage can be seen as divulging deep senses of guilt and fear on recalling the incidents as verbal expression fails to articulate the tragic events with their torturing memories and unresolved moral questions. The physicality of the actors, therefore, is for mirroring the characters' internal turmoil, guilt, fear, and anxiety as their body movements dramatize the burden of memory that resists articulation. In this sense, *Maria Kizito* proves to be a prototype of postdramatic theatre in which the body replaces language and the performers take the place of former well-developed characters so as to communicate in the sensory language of the body what can never be expressed through verbal communication.

An ideal example of the role physicality plays in the Ehn's drama is a passage narrated by Sister Teresa that reads, "A woman with a dead baby on her back made irregular circles— / She flapped like a flat tire / Around and around looking for air. / A woman in the cloister; a woman circling, exhausted / Lay her dead child down and lay down next; / She could not sleep. Only the living sleep" (Ehn, Kizito 207) . The excerpt depicts the image of a woman carrying a dead baby on her back moving aimlessly in circles on the stage in utter overtiredness. The repeated circular motion of the woman, "flapped like a flat tire / Around and around looking for air," embodies a sense of entrapment in the post-traumatic experience

where the body cannot transcend the despair and grief it has witnessed. The body of her dead child on her back stands for the emotional and psychological burden victims have come to shoulder due to the events of mass violence. The whole image complies with a tenet of postdramatic theatre in which the body of the actor and everything related to it are key elements in the communication of feelings and psychological state, especially at the time of trauma and after it, a function that verbal language can stand helpless to express. Theresa's words, "Only the living sleep" signifies a state of death in life that the woman, and the victims of genocide at large, suffer from. Though still breathing, she considers herself dead under the stress and burden of the trauma she has endured and is, hence, deprived of the peace that dormancy can offer. The physical state of the woman, thus, reflects her psychological state where only motions and gestures express what words cannot. In other words, in *Maria Kizito* the body becomes a witness to the suffering, pain, and survival of the victims, expressing emotions that are other way inexpressible.

In *Maria Kizito*, symbolism is, also, an essential postdramatic element that is used intensively to create multilayered structures of meaning in which traumatic memory, fragmented psyche, and moral disintegration are highlighted. The jerrican of gasoline, the lady moving in a circle with her dead baby on her back, and the image of time, skin, and stone are but some of the potent symbols used in the play to deepen the sense of disorientation and self-conflict. The jerrican of gasoline, for example, signifies both the real fuel that was used for burning the Tutsis alive and the internalized guilt of the protagonist, depicting her soul as burning under the impact of involvement in the massacre. Maria's spirit is weighed down with her religious identity as a nun: "one of the certainties of being a nun is knowing what type of shoes she'll wear for the rest of her life" (Coviello). The circular movement of one of the victims carrying her dead child on her back, as discussed earlier, reflects total entrapment in the vicious circle of guilt, despair, and trauma in post-

genocide Rwanda, where an outlet of the dilemma is impossible. The image of the century as a sequence of different disconnected elements, skin, stone soil, and soul, signifies the degradation of human life and spirituality under the impact of genocide. By exploiting symbols intensively in the play that way, Ehn makes use of a major postdramatic technique that avoids traditional language as a fallible means of expression and resorts, instead, to symbols that engage the spectators directly with inexpressible issues of trauma, memory, guilt, and atonement.

In *Maria Kizito*, the role of the audience has changed dramatically in a way that copes with the demands of a post-traumatic play. “Postdramatic theatre treats the performance as an event rather than a representation,” Sharma and Bhattacharya argue, “The experience of the audience is crucial, and the boundaries between the stage and the audience may be blurred” (17). Through the nonlinear structure of the play with its pauses and silences, fragmented language, and juxtaposed structures, the audience is invited to engage with the moral dilemma and the emotional complexity of the genocidal trauma in Rwanda. "*Maria Kizito* led its audience down the complicated path of good, evil, suffering and hope,” as such Kiernan argues. Instead of providing the audience with a well-knit play with a linear plot line, rising conflict, and coherent dialogue, the playwright presents a piece of art that is centered on the fragmentation of structure, pauses and silences, and symbolic references to give the audience the freedom to grapple with the making of meaning themselves and reflecting on the aftermath of trauma in their own ways. Unresolved moral questions, unjustified choices, and a complex psychological landscape remain beyond the disjointed structure of the play, mirroring the disjointedness and disintegration of genocidal trauma itself. The viewers of the play are, therefore, not mere passive audience that receive the message or the moral lesson of the author, but, rather, active participants in the making of meaning themselves. In this sense, they turn to be “witnesses” to genocide and its concomitant trauma, along with both victims and victimizers as Robert Skloot

argues in a review essay about the theatre of genocide. They bear witness, rethink many uncomfortable questions about faith and complicity, and interpret the incidents in their own ways.

The main target of engaging the audience in an interactive way with the theatrical production is manifested from the very beginning in the author's pre-note to the play in which he writes: "This play is about faith. In what did these nuns… believe? What was the architecture of their inner prayer space? With what kind of God were they intimate? *Maria Kizito* doesn't seek to explain the source of the genocide or to fix blame. It attempts to enter into the inner life of a perpetrator" (178). The writer's note suggests that the main aim of the play is to drag the audience into a deeply introspective journey into the psyches of both victims and perpetrators to contemplate the moral dilemma at the core of genocide. By not providing straightforward answers about Maria's motives or deeds, "is it fear of her people, hatred ideology, or anti-Tutsi propaganda?", the play invites the readers to sink into the recesses of Maria's self in an attempt to understand her real reasons. (Hogg 88-89). Without a narrative thread that guides the viewer, the audience are forced to take a more active role in interpreting the play as a whole and constructing meaning from the fragments given. Through engaging with a series of symbols, gestures, sounds, and juxtapositions, the audience are trapped into a common experience as witnesses to the trauma of genocide. Kiernan maintains that part of the nature of the play is "that the audience leaves wrestling with questions of how tragedies like this can occur and how humans are capable of creating them,". The audience's engagement with the performers represents one of the main principles of postdramatic theatre, "co-presence", where the focus is much more on the active involvement of the audience in the action itself by reflecting on the wider themes of the play rather than being mere viewers of it.

As such, Erik Ehn has found in the postdramatic theatre techniques the suitable avenue for writing about the horrific incidents of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The playwright has

utilized fragmentation of language, symbolism, physicality, and ruptured plot structure to introduce the readers to and engage them with the inexpressible, traumatic realities of the genocide. Having departed from the conventional linear plot structure, Ehn has managed to create a harsh, uncomfortable zone for the audience who are compelled to live the fragmented nature of trauma and the anguishing memory of the genocide and reflect on the moral ambiguity and emotional complexity related to the event. The silences, pauses, and physical symbols that the writer frequently uses prevent the audience from identifying with the characters and, therefore, remain at a critical distance at which they can reconsider the unresolved ethical issues raised throughout the performance and interpret the motives of the characters on more than a level. The resistance of the theatrical production to yield one unified meaning, therefore, compels the spectators to confront the limitations of language and presentation in depicting the profound traumatic impact of genocide on both characters and society, which is considered the landmark characteristic of postdramatic theatre.

As such, *Maria Kizito* powerfully exemplifies how postdramatic theatre can successfully present trauma and post-trauma on the stage through subverting the traditional theatrical modes of representation. By employing such an innovative approach of theatrical production, the playwright does not mean to re-present the atrocities of genocide on the stage, but to create a common background in which the audience and the performers bear witness to the incidents and share the moral responsibility towards the tragic events. In this regard, *Maria Kizito* invites the spectators through the techniques of postdramatic theatre to empathize with all parties involved in the mass violence of 1994, trying to figure out their own understanding and engagement with such big issues as trauma, collective memory, faith, and ethnicity. By resorting to the techniques of postdramatic theatre to highlight the complexities and ambiguities of genocidal trauma and memory, Ehn creates a moral space in which the audience struggles with their own interpretations of the events and their roles as witnesses to the memory of the trauma.

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