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2014-03-28
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NARRATING POST-COLONIAL CRISIS: THE POST-COLONIAL STATE AND THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE WORKS OF SONY LABOU TANSI.

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A research project submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

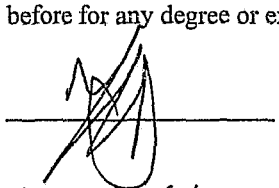
Johannesburg 1999

ABSTRACT

In this study I will examine two texts by the Congolese Author Sony Labou Tansi, namely The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez and Parenthesis of Blood. The aim of the research is to examine how and why the author uses techniques of allegory and magic realism instead of realism in his work. By closely examining the two texts and with the help of comparisons with his other works, I intend to show that the world he is representing is too fabulous to be rendered in a realistic manner. The use of allegory and irony in the text is a strategy that helps the author to challenge the oppression and despair in his society. The issue of gender is also important in both texts, therefore, I will examine how Labou Tansi portrays women in his works. I will do this by comparing his presentation of women to other female characters found in African canonical works by male writers.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It was submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university.



18 day of feb, 1999.

Dedication

A special thanks to my parents,
Klaas and Letta Mashishi,
who saw me through all the
stages of the research.

Acknowledgments

A number of people have been important in the production of this research. First and perhaps foremost I owe a dept of gratitude to Dan Odhiambo Ojwang, my supervisor, whose editorial talents have contributed enormously to the comprehensibility of this research report. I am particularly thankful for his insightful supervision at all times and for his very efficient and professional approach.

Klaas Mashishi for his editorial advice, encouragement and support. Also for his constant and invaluable help on many aspects of this study, particularly his excellent advice on the structure of the research.

Letta Mashishi for her very extensive and intensive proof-reading and the invaluable advice with the writing, and also for helping to type this long research report in a clear and aesthetically pleasing way.

Bhekizizwe Peterson the head of the African Literature department for his permission, encouragement and support for this study.

Dr. James Ogude because many of the issues discussed in my research came up in many of his lectures and informal discussions I had with my classmates.

All those too numerous to mention who provided advice and support along the way.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Sony Labou Tansi's writing belongs to a self-conscious literary tradition that explores the relationship between fiction and truth. He dedicated his first novel to Sylvain Bemba and Henri Lopez as a way of laying claim to a literary tradition he was emerging from. This was a tradition of Congolese or Central African writers whose work challenged a number of oppressive political and social circumstances (Kenneth Harrow, 1994). In a number of interviews, he has indicated his interest in writing a literature that engages with social issues while at the same time using a literary style that moves away from techniques of realism (ibid). The majority of African writers have been preoccupied with a desire to conceptualise the paradoxes of the post-colonial state. This endeavour has been fraught with both euphoric and pessimistic views of the post-colonial state. It is not easy to categorise Labou Tansi's work as either hopeful or pessimistic, he offers a bitter satire of post-colonial regimes of violence and domination.

Most African writers who wrote during the colonial period and immediately after independence saw it as their duty to recover the lost traditions of their respective

countries and to be involved in the creation of a people's culture. Novels written in this period were concerned mainly with the possibility of reconnecting with "traditional" Africa.

Frantz Fanon's theorizing on the relationship between the nation, national consciousness and cultural production was particularly influential on writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo and Ayi Kwei Armah. At the center of this debate was the argument for the legitimacy of the nation. Inspired by Fanon and dependency theories these writers held the belief that African countries had in fact entered a neo-colonial phase, one in which colonial structures and institutions continued their stranglehold on the new states, wearing the ideological masks of blackness and modernity. Independence was seen as a fraud: colonialism had disappeared but its structures remained. This understanding of decolonisation continued to generate discourses which viewed the post-colony in binary terms as an appendage of a metropolitan center.

Sony Labou Tansi's work points to new conditions of possibility; it signals ways in which recent African writing has attempted to break away from the colonial paradigm and anxieties without necessarily deleting altogether the problematic of the colonial legacy. Labou Tansi goes against the belief that the African space is one that can only be seen as a long struggle with colonialism, a struggle which continues into the post-

colonial period. His work signals a clean break with the nationalist literature of the colonial period. His work has moved away from the realist mode of narrative favored by many nationalist texts. His texts provide an ideological act of representation which presents alternative ways of seeing or reading social process in a post-colony (Lydie Moudileno, 1998). In the realist mode of narration found in many nationalist texts the subject is presented as a unified whole. Kenneth Harrow (1994) points out that these texts present subjects whose identities are inscribed in "family, clan, class, or nation"(315). However, Labou Tansi's work goes against the grain by turning all these assumptions upside down and "inside out every boundary of the self"(315). The language used to create the self is one of "revolt and affirmation" (315).

I will discuss Labou Tansi's text in the light of what Clifford Geertz (1980) calls the "theatre state" (102). African writers have responded in varied and complex ways to the changing realities of the contemporary African situation in the post-colonial era. Geertz along with Achille Mbembe (1992) argue that the use of power can best be understood as not merely residing in formal institutions but going beyond those institutions. For Mbembe the concept of a 'theatre state' is informed by the post-colonial state's ability to dramatise its own magnificence. The state puts on a drama that serves as a symbolic expression of what greatness is (Geertz, 102). This magnificent drama is presented by the state as a "ritual extravagance" that help order its subjects' perception of the world

(ibid, 102). Therefore, post-colonial states cannot be seen as concerned with bureaucratic governance alone but also as a grand theatre that is able to organise the world. According to Mbembe the drama put up by the state functions as a "fable" that "stupefy" the subjects of the post-colonial state (16). I will argue that both Parenthesis of Blood and The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez serve as allegories that challenge these grand narratives of post-colonial regimes of domination. In this study I will focus on these two texts because they both present through allegory, narratives that are able to challenge the authority of totalitarian regimes. Labou Tansi uses magic realism as a narrative technique that is able to subvert the regimes language of power by challenging the ability of language to fix meaning.

Instead of using Walter Rodney's (1982) the dependency which views the post-colony in binary terms as an appendage of a metropolitan centre, the idea of the "swollen state" offers an alternative view that articulates the dynamics of power relations in the post-colony. Essentially, a swollen state is a state that has a disproportionately large bureaucracy that is more a burden than a service to the citizenry. The reason I position myself within the theory of the post-colony as a "theatre state" is informed by the two texts I am studying. Labou Tansi's texts belong to a new wave of African writing which has attempted to break away from traditional realism my incorporating elements of fable, magic realism and popular culture. Labou Tansi uses

allegory and magic realism to portray a swollen state. This is evident in his fantastical description of the decapitalisation of Valancia in Seven Solitudes. Labou Tansi presents a world that has lost all sense of proportion by describing a whole city being moved literary from one location to another. In addition, the sense of a large and powerful bureaucracy is suggested by the way people fear the authorities even though they are never visibly present in their lives.

I will argue that by moving away from realism Labou Tansi's work gives a more complex but richer portrayal of the post-colonial state than normally found in canonical texts. I will support my argument by showing that his portrayal of women is an improvement on the works of canonical writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiogo. I will also show that by using magic realism, Labou Tansi is able to simultaneously present a richer picture of the post-colony and the inherent limitations of all narratives. This will explain why Labou Tansi does not proclaim to have the solutions to the problems facing Africa. In addition, I will argue that Labou Tansi uses the grotesque and laughter in his work because they both a have subversive potential. Both laughter and the grotesque attest to the fact that power is contested beyond the conventional/official domains. This is because one has to recognise the relative agency of those who would otherwise be considered powerless, laughter being a "genre" that is available to all regardless of status.

In Parenthesis of Blood and The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez Labou Tansi goes against notions of betrayal and the failure of African nationalism as adequate ways of explaining and representing a post-colonial situation. Labou Tansi seems to portray the post-colonial state as a "swollen state", a world characterised by the loss of any limits or sense of proportion (Larry Diamond, 1987). Power is in the hands of a few leaders who use it for their own privilege. In the study by James Ngate (1988) there are some observations made by Labou Tansi that give a hint to readers of what he is trying to accomplish in his work. Labou Tansi intends his work art "to make reality say what it would not have been able to say by itself, at least, what it might too easily have left unsaid"(foreword).

The orthodox nationalist narrative tends to portray history as a linear set of events based on collective oppression and hence collective response. This presentation of history obscures the fact that nations are social constructs with intense dialogical labour. Fanon's (1991) manichean trope was founded on the assumption that colonialism obliterated African culture or better still African agency. This model of power relations in colonial societies relies on the manichean opposition between the putative superiority of Europeans and the supposed inferiority of the native (Abdul JanMohamed, 1985, 63). The only way for change is through the total destruction of colonial structures, and thereby leaving no possibilities of altering the boundaries of domination outside

resistance. It assumes that outside resistance, the colonised were passive recipients of colonialism. The model does not recognise the possibility of appropriation or subversion of colonial discourses by the colonised. Labou Tansi re-examines the relationship between the ruler and the ruled without relying on the resistance versus passivity dyad (Frederick Cooper, 1994, 1517).

It is imperative to look at Achille Mbembe's (1992) theories of the relationship between the dominant and those they dominate to gain a better understanding of Labou Tansi's work. Mbembe writes: "The post-colonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or collaboration but can be described as *illicit cohabitation*, a relationship made fraught by the very fact that the ruler and its subjects having to share the same living space" (4). This, he asserts, "has resulted in the mutual zombification of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate... each robbed the other of their vitality and has left them impotent" (4). A zombie is a being that has no reasoning capacity, its function is merely to obey orders without question. Zombies are usually associated with witches, they are supposed to be the bodies of dead people that are under the control of another person. A zombie lacks the ability to think, he/she exist only to serve the wishes of those who manipulate their behavior. In both Parenthesis of Blood and Seven Solitudes Labou Tansi suggests the "mutual zombification" of both the state and its subjects by their inability to act independently. For example, in Seven

Solitudes a government officer is sent to Valancia to arrest dissidents only to fall in love with one of the residents and completely forget his mission. Labou Tansi presents a world where neither the authorities nor the common people are effective in their actions.

The Francophone African Literature that came after colonialism sought to distinguish itself from the exoticising literature that had preceded. it. Most of the literature written by the colonials served to give an account of the civilizing mission of the colonial project. These colonial writers had no reservations about their support for the colonial enterprise of their country. Ngate points out that a work like Pierre Loti's *Roman d' un spahi* helped formulate many of the negative stereotypes of Africa and Africans. The novel paints a picture of Africa as mysterious, bizarre, strange, and illogical.

James Ngate suggests that because Francophone African writers came on the scene after colonial literature, chronologically, theirs was only the second African literature in French. This also means that "the general context of Francophone literature is not Africa itself but also, and primarily, the long French tradition of literary and other discourses on Africa and Africans" (Ngate, 20). The obvious thing to state would be that Francophone African literature was born in the colonial context. The African writer found him/herself in a process where he/she was using the colonizer's language, a

language that had a long history of producing discourses on Africa and Africans. These discourses usually painted a negative picture of Africans. It is against these negative myths about Africa that African writers chose to react. Most of the novels published immediately after independence dealt with the politics of redemption. Novels like The African Child and The Ambiguous Adventure expressed a belief in the possibility of reconnecting with "traditional" Africa (Ngate, 59). This connection was necessary if the African subject was to find the possibility of regeneration. Most of these works were anguished at the state of African society but secure that all could be made right by appealing to the ancestors and to African tradition. However, the second generation of writers expressed ideas that were in contrast to the early writing. Writers like Yambo Ouologuem and Ahmadou Kourouma called into question this appeal to the ancestors as a way of fostering change in Africa. They were disillusioned with the new African republics and the new leaders who had so much to say about ancestral wisdom. Ngate says that narrators of these novels are involved in what could be called a politics of anger. The satire that results leaves little room for a too easy celebration of Africa (59). Sony Labou Tansi follows in this vein of satirical writing.

Sony Labou Tansi[1] was born in Kimwanza, Zaire, of a Zairean father and a Congolese

[1]The biographical information on Sony Labou Tansi comes from the Internet and can be found at the following URL addresses: **WWW.Heinemann.com/trade/trawst.html/, WWW.Mediaport.net**.

mother. His parents moved him away from a Belgian missionary education to the other side of the Congo river where he had a French education. The French teachers in Congo did not want any of their students using their local languages and they punished anyone who did not speak proper French. Not surprisingly, in later life Labou Tansi would say that a principal intention in his work is to develop in the French tongue "our own language". His French education enabled him to write over twenty plays and some novels especially known for their decolonized French. He went to high school in the capital Brazzaville, and completed his education at the Ecole Normale Superieure d'Afrique Centrale. He became a high school teacher of French and English in several provincial centers.

As a teacher, Sony worked with his students in subversive activities through student newspapers and theatre troupes. Most of these activities were met with censorship. He later moved to Pointe Noire, where he taught English at the College Tchicaya-Pierre, and then back to Brazzaville, where he worked as an administrator in several Ministries, which could explain why his work is full of hilarious satire on bureaucratic mentality and language. He first wrote poetry which he found hard to publish even though Leopold Senghor wrote a preface for him. He then turned to fiction and drama. In one year, 1979, his first play (*Conscience de tracteur*

[Tractor Consciousness]), first novel (La Vie et demie [A life and a Half]), and a

novella (*Le Malentendu* [The Misunderstanding]) were published, and both the novel and the novella won literary prizes in France. The same year in Brazzaville, he founded one of the best known theatre troupes in Africa, the Rocado Zulu Theatre. This group performed his play in Dakar, Paris, and New York, and earned him an international reputation. In New York George C. Wolfe directed one of his plays. In 1985 three of his plays were performed in Paris at the same time. He has consistently won prizes at international festivals since 1978. Among them are the 1982 Inter-Africa Theatre Prize for his troupe, the 1983 Grand Prix de l'Afrique Noire for the novel *L'Ante-Peuple*, and in 1988 the Ibsen Foundation Prize, given by the drama critics of Paris, and the First Prize at the international festival of Francophone cultures. He died in Paris in 1995.

Like Anglophone writers of the same generation, such as Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie, he is often compared to the magical realists of Latin American fiction, especially Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Eileen Julien (1992) writes that Labou Tansi's books serve as an "impulse is to empower... through a tradition of ridicule and fable"(125). Julien points out that Labou Tansi, in the novel *La vie et demie* "abandons the canons of realism that governed fiction in the 1950s and 1960s," producing a fictional landscape of "grandiose Rabelaisian numbers" like the 12, 711 books which appear praising a dictator after his death, or the same outsize character having sex with fifty virgins on national television, or bringing to his political career "his eighteen

outstanding qualities as a former cattle thief"(128). His novels are particularly rich in satire and the grotesque.

Laughter and his other extravagant literary effects defend the psyche against the surreal or numbing harshness of real events. Despite their anti-naturalist aesthetic, many of his works are in fact based on specific events. *La vie et demie,* for example, was written in anger at a particularly bad moment in 1977 just after some friends had been killed.[2] *L'Ante-Peuple* too was based on the story of a friend from Zaire, a refugee in Pointe Noire, who had been falsely accused of the murder of a young woman. Similarly, The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez [*Les sept Solitudes de Lorsa Lopez*] began with a real event, the sight of a body, surrounded by a crowd waiting for the police. Contemporary writers like Labou Tansi depart from the nationalist strand when dealing with the post colonial crises. In the book by Harrow (1985), Labou Tansi categorically rejects the "coldly rational, cartesian view of existence"(317). His texts present history as not just a linear set of events but as "stitches" that result after we have mended the rugged and torn patterns of our lives (Marechera; 1978,24). Labou Tansi uses satire to critique the post-colonial state of excess.

To those who view his work as dark and pessimistic he has this advice:

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[2]WWW.mediaport.net

> Read superficially, my books are pessimistic. The advice I give then is to reread them. Reread until the pessimism dissipates and disappears. My worship of life leaves me no other means of expression than mouth to mouth collaboration with lucidity. (Ngate,136)

To achieve this aim, Labou Tansi uses various types of humour, from irony and incongruity, to gallows humour and satire. This is the only way to write, "at a time when man is determined to kill life", as the author says in his foreword to *La Vie et demie.*

> I aspire to the vital laughter.. It is insulting to speak of despair to humankind. Humankind has to live. And its life the kind of freedom I am showing. To live one's life and not die to it. That is possible. Let us dare. (Ngate,132)

The lack of chronological sequence of events in the novel shows that history is not merely linear, but quite arbitrary and intricate. The narrative strategy, as Eileen Julien points out, "manifests no conventional sense of what is realistic" (379). Labou Tansi shows that satiric, inventive excess, is as effective a weapon against the parasitic state, as are the realist works of Sembene Ousmane.

Labou Tansi's theatre owes something to the Central African tradition, a non-naturalist theatre like the Kongo theatre of healing where the mentally ill are encouraged to perform, or another regional genre which uses outsize puppets.[3] While the plays share themes and inventiveness of language with his fiction, Labou Tansi has said that the center of theatre is the actor (ibid). Both the plays and novels embrace marginality and displacement from "the capital" as the place of an alternative vision, and even more as the place where sanity and a respect for life can flourish. The plot of *L'Ante-Peuple* removes the hero Dadou from his post as president of a Teachers' College in Zaire to the life of a refugee in a fishing village and among the urban destitute across the river. In Seven Solitudes the capital is moved from Valancia to Nsanga-Norda because the authorities are angry with the Valancians.

Counterfactual, fabular narrative continues in *Les Yeux du volcan*, which takes leave of fictional realism altogether, with its events which may or may not have taken place; its explosion of characters into shape-shifting identities with fantastic names like Alvano Salvo do Moesso-Nsa, and its images of gigantic horses of different colours parading through the town. Labou Tansi's use of humour is self-critical, painfully corrective, serious at heart, and hopeful.

[3]WWW.mediaport.net

In this introduction, I have introduced the main issues that will be discussed in this research report. Key terms such as allegory, magic realism, gender, theatre state, and incongruity have been introduced. I have presented a short discussion of Labou Tansi's literary history by briefly discussion his other works. I have also included a brief discussion of his background.

The second chapter develops on the magic realist theme by looking at how Labou Tansi was influenced by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I particularly explore how time and numbers are used by Labou Tansi as a way of challenging the linear presentation of history. To him history appears to be circular as there is no linear development of plot in Seven Solitudes. Labou Tansi seems to be refuting the manner empericist/rationalist explanations are given to explain the post-colonial crisis. For him the post-colony is too complex to have definite answers that will make things better. He seems to be alluding to the fact that most organisations have offered solutions that have amounted to nothing.[4] The problems of the post colony seem to continue no matter what answers are offered to explain what is wrong. Franz Roh in Scott Simpkins (1988) characterises realism and magic realism as direct opposites of each other. For example, if realism

[4]The Wold Bank is a perfect example of a western organisation that has offered rational solutions to most 'Third World' countries. A lot of scientific research has been done so as to find ways of solving the political problems in these 'Third world' countries. However, even with all these rational explanations the problems of the 'Third World' persist.

relates history and is logical and demonstrates cause and effect, magic realism would deal with myth/legend without closure but demonstrate negative capability. On the surface magic realism could be seen as resorting to escapism and not facing 'reality'. However, this would be a misconception because magic realism is another form of realism. The difference is that magic realism uses supplementation as a way to 'improve' upon the realistic text (Simpkins). Magical texts do not abandon the 'real' world in favor of fantasy, they use supplementation as a form of defamiliarization.

The third chapter examines the use of humour and carnival in Labou Tansi's works. Here I will argue that Labou Tasni uses incongruity as a satirical tool to undermine the authority of an oppressive regime. The comic treatment of painful events makes it bearable to face what would otherwise be impossible. Carnival is used to examine the role of popular culture as a strategy used to challenge authority. Here I hope to show that the use of carnival enables people to remove the greatness of authority and reveal it as ordinary. People engage in carnivalesque activities as a way of escaping their humdrum existence. Therefore, even though carnival can be seen as a second life of the people it is also a space that traps people. This is because it is able to make their suffering bearable without really changing society

The fourth chapter looks at the portrayal of women in Labou Tansi's fiction. This

chapter is divided into two sections. The first section compares the portrayal of women in Labou Tansi's work to that of other canonical African male writers. My argument here is that Labou Tansi improves a great deal on the portrayal of women in comparison to these writers because he is not constrained by the manichean allegory of gender. The second section looks at how the human body is used to demonstrate the resilience of the human spirit. Labou Tansi is able to imagine life that continues even after its body has been destroyed. This is a magic realist way of challenging the brutality of oppressive regimes. The reason I place this discussion of the body here is that many canonical writers use the female body as an object of their anxieties. By either idealising or degrading the body the male writer maginalises women from political life. However, Labou Tansi suggests that one cannot destroy the human spirit by destroying the human body.

The last chapter, the conclusion, summarises the main arguments in the thesis. I will argue that if one considers the texts as a harsh criticism of post-colonial violence by its examination of the transgression of the most fundamental rules of human value then it is difficult to see it as an optimistic representation of society. However, the refusal to give in to despair in the texts is what ultimately stands out. I will also argue that in spite of their weakness the magic realist texts of Labou Tansi offer a more complex picture of post-colonial politics than those found in realist canonical texts.

Chapter 2

The Art of Decadence: The Post-colony as a World out of Proportion

"An allegory starts from the writers need to create a specific world of fictional reality" (Edwin Honig).

The aim of this chapter is to explore how Sony Labou Tansi uses allegory to expose the self-destructiveness of post-colonial regimes. I will begin with a discussion of the different features of allegory found in the works of Labou Tansi. I will then examine how allegory is used as a satirical tool that enables the author to expose the decadence of post-colonial states. Thereafter, I will discuss the use of magic realism in Seven Solitudes and the significance of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's influence on Labou Tansi. In both The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez and Parenthesis of Blood the post-colonial regime is portrayed as a "theatre state" one that performs and displays its power in order to control its subjects. This situation enables it to construct a world of meanings in which it is prestigious and attractive. However, Labou Tansi portrays a world in which meaning is constantly challenged and characters can never agree on what things mean.

Following David Lodge's definition, allegory is a kind of symbolic narrative which does not merely suggest something beyond its literal meaning, but insists on being

decoded in terms of another meaning (David Lodge, 1990, 114). Evidence of allegory can be found in most non-realistic narratives. The works of such writers as Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Thomas Pynchon show evidence of allegory because as Carolynn Van Dyke (1985, 291-292) states many of those writers use names or plot motifs to evoke archetypal stories, including allegories. Labou Tansi uses both names and plot motifs to evoke allegory: a man kills his wife and the town waits forever for the authorities to arrive; soldiers arrive in a village to arrest a political activist named Libertashio, only to find out he is already dead.

The use of allegory as a narrative device gives the author the ability to portray a world that is fabulous because of its special characteristics. Realism would have anchored the narrative in a rigid space that might not have been able to fully render the absurdities of the post-colonial state. Through the use of allegory Sony Labou Tansi is able to paint a portrait of an incompetent regime. His stories are able to capture the colour and chaos of post-colonial states. It is possible to see an overlap between allegory and some strands of realism. For example, socialist realism creates typical characters in typical circumstances in the same manner in which allegory creates archetypical characters. Practitioners of magic realism would argue that in realism elements of everyday life have become virtually invisible because of their familiarity. Scot Simpkins (1988) points out that the magical text tries to present familiar things in unusual ways. One has

to recognise the difference between magic realism and fantastic literature. Fantastic literature is closer to science fiction in that it often imagines other realms of existence that do not always have a connection to the 'real' world. Magic realism on the other hand, is firmly rooted in the real. It uses supplementation as a narrative device that enriches the realist text (Simpkins, 140).

Since anonymity and abstraction are some of the features of allegory, the setting of Seven Solitudes is not specified. Even though there are similarities between Nsanga-Norda and the author's native Congo, place names are fictitious. It is a post-colonial African state, although the state's identity is not made explicit. This reliance on anonymity is further shown in the way the narrative is distanced from the heat of the moment such that the author cannot be implicated in the political intricacies of the neo-colonial state. Also, despite the ubiquitous presence of "the authorities" suspended like a threat (or a challenge) over the protagonists throughout the novel, there appears to be minimal reference to situations of poverty and the lack of resources, apart from references to European mineral exploitation. The same is true of the play. The country it is set in remains nameless even though the society portrayed is a post-colonial state. A lot of the things that characterise a post-colonial world are absent. People don't seem to be starving or homeless. This is because both the play and the novel do not paint a realist portrayal of society but are allegorical representations of power relationships.

This is evident in the way Labou Tansi presents the society in the novel. The narrative style depicts a fabulous world where everything is out of proportion.

One of the principal methods of allegory used by Labou Tansi is analogy through nomenclature. Edwin Honig (1954) points out that:

> analogy through nomenclature is allied to the personification of abstractions: the use of an attribute name that, as it constantly designates an event, person, idea, or quality existing outside the story, builds up a sense of like identity in the fiction.(118)

Labou Tansi highlights the individual characteristics of his characters hopes by the names he gives them (for example Libertashio and Bronzario). Through this allegorical device he is able to suggest both the uniqueness and the universality of both characters. The names of both characters help to highlight the important thematic role they each fulfill in the respective text. In Parenthesis of Blood Libertashio represents the death of liberty in society and the specific reasons for its demise, in this case living under a totalitarian government that does not tolerate dissenting voices. Liberty, which is the right to live as one pleases, does not flourish in situations where dominant forces do not allow freedom of expression. Hence Libertashio is sought by the authorities because

they see him as spreading dangerous ideas. In The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez Estina Bronzario (the woman of bronze) represents the strength and dignity suggested by her association with the metal bronze. This metal which was used to make weapons and tools in the Bronze Age suggests the toughness of Estina Bronzario. She is the most respected person in Valancia and her character is in sharp contrast with the male characters that inhabit the novel. Such names are able to give reference to meaning beyond the fictional world created by the author.

Labou Tansi also uses allegory as a satirical tool that is able to expose the decadence of post-colonial governments. Instead of using a realist narrative, Labou Tansi presents a grotesque world that is controlled by political greed. Bernard Mc Elroy (1989) states that decadence and the grotesque usually go hand in hand. One of the reasons for this could be that grotesque art is itself decadent. Its obsession with exaggeration and excess could stem from a jaded mind that can no longer take life seriously or even tragically (Mc Elroy, 129). It is a sign of a mind that revels in self-indulgence. However, this is not the case with Labou Tansi. He uses the grotesque to reveal a world that is laughing at its own demise. It is a world that has lost its pride and is now involved in the unscrupulous pursuit of pleasure. Labou Tansi shows a correlation between social and moral decay and the emergence of a brutal, self-mocking universe. In The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez the leadership's concern for rank is demonstrated in the use

of hyperbole and superlatives, repetition and lists. As the novel opens, the excesses of state are exaggerated to a ludicrous degree, with "the authorities" giving orders that the capital be moved from Valancia to Nsanga-Norda - the seventh "decapitalisation"(2). Fantasy does not stray too far from the modern (post-colonial) state's love of monuments and triumphal arches erected (and in the novel, moved) at the citizens' expense, to the glorification of national leaders.

Reality is superseded by the absurd incongruity of fantastic feats measured in the detailed itineraries of items being relocated: "... the seven drawbridges, the thirty-nine mausoleums, the fifteen triumphal arches, the nine Towers of Babel ..." as well as town squares, swimming pools, the water from an artificial lake, and many other objects large and small"(2). The post-colony is thus characterised by the loss of any limits or sense of proportion. Labou Tansi's text can be read as an attempt to unravel the parody of post-colonial regimes of violence and domination. If this scene of the decapitalisation was rendered in a realist manner it would have lost its power. This is because we as readers are used to the fantastic goings-on of post-colonial governments. Allegory then can be seen as another form of defamiliarization. We are made to look at everyday events in a new light because of the manner in which they are presented.

A more ominous display of magnificence might be the narrator's ironic reference in the

novel to the "volmara viaduct (measuring two kilometers, the longest in the world)"(55). It could be that Labou Tansi was thinking here of one of Mobutu Sese Seko's favorite constructions -"the longest overhead power-line in the world" -which controlled the energy supply to the mineral-rich Shaba Province (Bayart, 245). The motivation is not merely display, but to prevent that province's possible secession. Since material property is one of the chief political virtues,

> The struggle for influence consists essentially in making use of all means available to build up one's prestige and authority at the expense of others and in contempt of truth and justice.(Bayart, 221)

The irony of the post-colonial excess is that it is not the property of the authorities alone but of the subjects who also appropriate their (the authorities') aesthetics. The common people's love of majesty is shown in their affection for Sarngata Nola's official ballet troupe. To the mayor's disappointment this procession heralds neither the police, nor the angels of the Last Judgement, but

> the descent on our town of the ninety-three performers of the Sarngata Nola ballet troupe, which had been based at Valtano before the seventh decapitalisation but which,

on the instructions of the authorities, had moved to Nsanga-Norda to entertain the Capital and had become the authorities own ballet troupe - fifty-nine women, twenty-seven dwarfs and seven pygmies from Oryongo.(32)

In this sense, the people are a lot like the Man's wife in Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born. Labou Tansi has his precursors when it comes to this subject.

In Africa, political independence brought with it the promise of freedom and a better life. The new African rulers came into power carrying slogans of freedom. In Parenthesis of Blood Labou Tansi is able to expose the lust for power of these leaders by personifying liberty as a person living under a despotic government. Since in a situation like this people are not able to prosper liberty (Libertashio) dies. The brutality of the post-colonial government is shown to destroy all that it comes into conflict with. Mbembe (1992) discusses the *commandements*[5] "concern for rank" as central to its hold on power because:

[5]Mbembe uses the term to "denote colonial authority, that is in so far as it embraces the images and structures of power and coercion, the instruments and agents of their enactment and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey them, without, of course, discussing them"(30)

> The *commandement* has to be extravagant, since it has to feed not only itself but also its clientele. Likewise it must furnish public proof of its prestige and glory by a sumptuous (yet burdensome) presentation of its symbols of status, displaying the heights of luxury in matters of dress and life style, thereby turning prodigal acts of generosity into grand theater. (9)

This suggests that the state has to come into close encounter with the subjects. In its attempt to legitimise its rule, the bureaucracy is forced to engage in a dialogue with its subjects. Labou Tansi alludes to the extravagant nature of post-colonial regimes when he portrays Carlanzo Mana (the bureaucrat from the ministry of the interior) as having a giraffe-like structure and wearing a leather suit. The description of the structure alone implies that we are dealing with a "fat cat" who has more food to eat than required by a normal human being. This grotesque description is a perfect presentation of decadence. The image created is one of over-indulgence. The excess of the post-colonial state is also explored through the budget of the mayor. A large proportion of this money is spent on trivial things like entertainment, street decorations and flags.

In Seven Solitudes Labou Tansi exposes the "banality of power"[6] in the post-colony (Mbembe, 1992, 3). The police and justice department is extremely incompetent in pursuit of its obligations and yet its distant presence exerts a tremendous pressure on the people of the coast. The respect the police get emanates from the excessive force they use on those who disobey them. The people of the coast cannot bury the dead before the police carry out their investigation even if it takes them (the police) more than thirty years to come. In the play Parentheses of Blood the soldiers sent after Libertashio also feel the influence of state even though it is far away. Their obedience of state laws leads to an absurd series of actions that sees them kill each other. The refusal to question absurd state laws is shown to zombify people to the extent that their own lives become meaningless. As each soldier in charge starts to believe that Libertashio is dead his subordinates shoot him in direct obedience of the state's prime directive. This series of actions seems to allude to a situation where power has gone out of hand and even where those people who enforce it are at its mercy. After the soldiers have killed those who believe in Libertashio's death they turn against the state because Libertashio has been pardoned. The excesses of state are shown to undermine even the state itself.

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[6]Mbembe states that by the banality of power he is "referring to those elements of the obscene and grotesque" which he argues are central to all systems of domination. (3)

Seven Solitudes is a novel rich in examples of spectacle and magnificence. For example, we see the zombification of the mayor, who timidly refuses to bury the bodies until the police have arrived, The repeated reassembling of the bones, the absurd addition to the murder scene of the mayor and the judge's paraphernalia until Nertez Coma's original photograph is no longer accepted as evidence suggest the incompetence of the authorities. The civil servant Carlanzo Mana, despite his huge size (Carlanzo Giraffe), cannot face up to the authorities. Elmunto Louma, one of the policemen who came to investigate Estina Benta's murder falls helplessly in love with Elmano Zola's younger epileptic virgin daughter. The populace in general follow the official line without resisting, until the one definitely "unzombified" character, the charismatic Bronzario, insists on carrying on with the burial.

Whether the relationship between the coast and Nsanga-Norda is understood as an ethnic one or that of the elite and ordinary people, the consequences of colonial contact remain the same. The narrator traces the roots of animosity between the coast and the Nsanga-Norda to the arrival of the Portuguese. If one reads beyond the text, this reference to the French can be seen as an allusion to the slave trade that riddled the central west Africa in the 18th century. The elite who inherited the post-colonial state deemed it fit to use the popguns that were introduced by French in their midst to enable them to protect the spoils left for them by the colonisers after decolonisation. Labou

Tansi's presentation of the post-colony gives a different view from that of nationalist politics where the argument is that in periods of domination society is divided into those who resist and those who collaborate. Labou Tansi introduces the idea of hybridity at the expense of binary theories that focus strictly on the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, hybridity here referring to something that is an offspring of two or more elements.

The African novel, like its western counterpart, has seen realism being the dominant mode of fiction, realism being the presentation of recognizable characters and situations with some psychological and sociological depth (Damian Grant, 1970, 34). But all through the period of realism's domination, writers of fiction have moved to transgress the bounds of the recognizable and to admit the strange, the uncanny, and the fabulous into their work. Magic realism is one such non-realistic fiction used to refer to writing that seems aware of the possibilities of realism but refuses to be contained by those possibilities. David Lodge (1992) has pointed out that practitioners of magic realism are writers who have lived through great historical convulsions and wrenching personal upheavals. These writers feel that realism cannot adequately represent their experiences. This explains why it is associated with contemporary Latin-American fiction (for example the work of the Colombian novelist, Gabriel Garcia Marquez), but it is also encountered in novels from other continents. Magic realism usually can be found in the

works of writers who come from countries with a recent history of violence. For example, Gunther Grass in Germany has used magic realism to deal with the history of Nazism in that country. Magic realism could simply be what David Lodge (1992) defines as "when marvelous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative"(114).

One can discern parallels between Seven Solitudes and the magic realist novels of Garcia Marquez to the extent that Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude could be seen as a literary precursor to Labou Tansi's novel. There are similarities between the titles of both novels and the use of character names. Both authors give most of their characters similar sounding names, for example the Buendias share names while female characters in Seven Solitudes have similar names. In my opinion, it is more interesting to demonstrate the influence of Garcia Marquez use of time and numbers on Labou Tansi. Labou Tansi's presentation of time as not linear but circular can be seen as the result of Marquez's influence. Those familiar with Garcia Marquez's work will know his fascination with destiny and predetermination (Martinez-Maldonado, 1990, 127). In the works of both Garcia Marquez and Labou Tansi, the future is frequently foretold without difficulty, even with numerical precision. Most of Labou Tansi's characters are always forewarned of their impending death. Both Estina Benta and Estina Bronzario know about their death before it happens. In Garcia Marquez's work the number three

frequently recurs while in Seven Solitudes it is the number seven that recurs. Manuel Martinez-Maldonado (1990) points out that this focus on numeracy and time is a way of showing how man has "chosen to divide his life into arithmetical units: minutes and hours, days and weeks, months and years (128). It is a way of suggesting that human passions and anxieties only last a mere fraction of these units of time

Since time and numbers give a series of events significance and weight, Labou Tansi refuses to present a world where history is an unproblematic linear series of events. The circularity of events is one of the reasons that the passage of time is chaotic for the characters in Labou Tansi's novel. The longings and sufferings of the characters in Seven Solitudes are mouldy from time's refusal to pass by once and for all. By demonstrating the similiarities between Garcia Marquez and Labou Tansi I am not suggesting that the Congolese writer is merely aping his Latin-American counterpart. What I am arguing is that both recognise that by making numbers the basis of human time, "we have packaged our lives and constrained them by formulae -the units of time, the divisions of calenders"(Martinez-Maldonado,126). Numerical time as measured by humans creates an illusion of a linear world where cause and effect are easily correlated. This is exactly what Labou Tansi wants to challenge.

The Seven Solitudes Of Lorsa Lopez is made up of a number of unrelated stories that

do not seem to advance the plot. Even trying to find a recognisable plot is very difficult. The novel opens with the decapitalisation of Valancia which is followed by the murder of Estina Benta, at the same time other fantastic stories emerge and weave their way through the novel. Yet not a single story truly advances the plot or provides understanding of what is happening. Each new twist in the text resembles Kafka's The Trial in the sense that the plot "only highlights the detours or tunnels within the all-encompassing labyrinth of text and language, without any hint of an overall pattern"(Andre Brink, 1998,189).

Mbembe mentions that state power creates its own world of meaning and naturalizes it by "integrating it into the consciousness of the period"(3). Labou Tansi presents his narrative as a fable meant to challenge this monologic character of dominant forces. The fable "a short tale used to teach a moral" is able to operate outside the realm of reality (and realism) (M.H. Abrahams, 1993,5). Moudileno points out that through this literary technique Labou Tansi is able to suggest that the state's version of truth is an elaborate fable institutionalized by the tyrant and characterised by transgression and excess. However, the narrative, unlike the tyrant, does not pretend that what it is saying is the gospel truth. The writer's fable recognises itself as such. Even though Moudileno is talking in relation to *La vie et demie* these statements are true of Seven Solitudes.

In the universe of Seven Solitudes, characters can never agree on what things mean. The fish with death's head that Fernando Lambert catches (and "baptises") has a sacred appearance. Its face is covered with dark lenses that cause it to resemble a Dogon death mask. Although its identity cannot be ascertained (fish or snake, dead or alive?) the population is convinced of its significance. Some say its flesh would keep one young forever, others see its ecological importance. However, years later "scientists from the Queen City anthropological laboratory were to establish that the fish was the indisputable ancestor of man" (62). As with the "phoney centenary" (1) the narrator's comment reflects ironically on apparently official opinions.

The difficulties of interpretation are underscored by the scratches the monster Yogo has left on the walls of a former cathedral for future glyotographers to muse over. They are flexigraphs (a neologism?), strange drawings, and glyptodonts - a large extinct mammal from South America, and an example of Labou Tansi's play on words. Their interpretations differ depending on whether the interpreters are from Valancia or from Nsanga-Norda, whether they are Mahometans, Christians, deists or atheists. The Christians' prophecy has biblical overtones. Nasna Mopata believes that the graffiti foretell the murder of Ruenta, Estina Bronzario and Fr Bona. Baktiar Ben Sari appears to see words written in the language of Nsanga-Norda meaning that the fire would come after Estina Bronzario's murder. The same situation has occurred with the bellowing

of the cliffs which the Valancians take to be a cry and the Nsanga-Nordans understand to be laughter. The depression is finally filled (and further warnings prevented) by pieces of Motosse eel. The inability to fix meaning suggests the inappropriateness of always insisting on employing rationalist categories in the reading of post-colonial politics. This is not to suggest that there is no room for rationalism in a post-colonial state, but one must be aware of the contradictions in most rationalist explanations of social phenomena.

Another episode that demonstrates the difficulty of fixing meaning involves the "man-crab" who arrives by the sea from Nsanga-Norda with his own prophetic book found in a silver box in the stomach of an angler fish he has caught. He has deciphered it and predicts the murder of "the woman of bronze" and the day when earth and sea are to be joined. However, the most absurd example of the arbitrary construction of meanings relates to the parrot's influence in "revealing" the secret of the identity of the person who passed on the pubic lice, and then being executed in the town square for falsehood (108).

In the play, language itself loses the ability to communicate, as the fool and later Madame Portes each invent their own language. Mme Portes has long soliloquies which some characters claim to understand, but which her husband calls the language of the

dead. The world Labou Tansi portrays is one where meaning is radically unstable.

Edwin Honig points to the special characteristics of allegory when he says that the:

> double purpose of making a reality and making it mean
> mean something is peculiar to allegory and its directive
> language. In this it differs from the univocal aim of realistic
> fiction, which imitates the world-as-is from a view reduced
> to commonplace and assumes only what may readily be taken
> for granted throughout. In fixing and relating fictional identities,
> allegory gives new dimension to things of everyday acceptance
> thereby converting the commonplace into purposeful forms. (113)

Labou Tansi avoids representing the "world-as-is" because he is dealing with the problem of language. Both these texts are concerned with the inability of language to communicate anything. Therefore to try and represent the world in a conventional realist style while at the same time showing that language is troublesome in its inability to communicate objective truths, will be self defeating. The "real" world cannot be represented objectively through the use of language. The use of allegory gives Labou Tansi the liberty to explore the metaphorical aspects of language. T.. . world that the

novel talks about is full of fantastic goings-on while at the same time the magic realist narrative also gives a fabulous quality to this world. It is like a double-edged sword. A lot of unexplainable things have happened in post-colonial Africa. The brutality of leaders, the adverse weather conditions and the high number of coups give a sense of a fantastic world. To be able to give a sense of this fantastic reality Labou Tansi uses a narrative style that is itself fabulous.

Since the new rulers had no intention of improving the quality of life of their subjects those who are perceived as a threat must be destroyed. Liberty is a fundamental threat to their position of power. People cannot be allowed to express their feelings freely because if they are unhappy they may incite rebellion against the state. Since a despotic government needs to construct a world where it is the only benevolent father-figure, it cannot tolerate rivalry. In the play Libertashio's children mourn the loss of their father while the government denies his death. Through the use of allegory Labou Tansi is able to portray a world where the ability to control the meaning of things is the route to power. The state constantly tries to create a world of meaning for the public in order to keep it under control. The post-colonial ruler has to keep a close eye on the public in order to control their actions. First the ruling party portrays itself as powerful and worthy of respect by displaying its magnificence. This helps to blind people temporarily by confusing their value system. When people believe in the greatness of the

government, they try to copy its mannerism. However this situation cannot last forever because as the quality of life does not improve people begin to question the state.

Violence then becomes necessary as a tool of controlling the masses. Violence then can be seen as another form of language that is used to communicate the power of the state. Libertashio is made to die "their kind of death" which is only a physical death because his memory lives on in the character of the Fool (13).

The Fool who is constantly referred to as resembling Libertashio is reminiscent of the fools found in Shakespeare's plays. On the surface he appears to be an incoherent character, but he does possess insight that the other characters do not have. His constant reminder to the other characters not to stand on Libertashio's grave suggests the need to respect the dead. Because he is viewed as a possible reincarnation of Libertashio or at least in possession of his memory it is ironic that the other characters do not pay any attention to him. In the end he invents his own language that the other characters do not understand. This seems to suggest that liberty is a language that is alien in a post-colony.

The Fool is used in a similar way that Shakespeare uses Feste in Twelfth Night. He is someone who brings the reader to an understanding of how language is used in the play.

In Twelfth Night Feste has insight into the "wrong side as well as the right side of language"(Bristol, 1984,141). As a clown or fool he is seen by other characters as a person of little understanding as compared to them. But like most fools in Shakespeare's work he is in a "situation of enhanced understanding" because he is a professional at what he does (ibid, 141). The fool is someone who makes a living by making people laugh. He does this by acting silly and appears to highlight the follies of people. However, because he is constantly in a position where he has to act foolishly he needs to understand human folly. This is where he gets his insight. In addition, the clown acts as a chorus who stands outside the action of the narrative and is able to draw attention to what other characters miss.

Clown ...To see this age! A sentence is but a cheveril glove
to a good wit. How quickly the wrong side may
be turned outward!

Viola. Nay, that's certain. They dally nicely with words
may quickly make them wanton.

Clown. I would therefore my sister had no name, sir.

Viola. Why, man?

Clown. Why sir, her name's a word, and to dally with that
word might make my sister wanton. But indeed words

are very rascals since bonds disgraced them (141).

This exchange between Viola and the clown shows that the "wrong" or wanton side of language reduces things to just words and words to just things (Bristol,1984).

In Parenthesis of Blood the Fool is used a little differently by Labou Tansi. The Fool does not offer greater understanding to the other characters in the narrative, Libertashio's relatives mostly see him as a nuisance. However, the Fool is important because he offers some insight to the reader of the text. His isolation from the other characters in the narrative links him with the death of Libertashio. The other characters do not understand his many utterances which include a lot of words he has made up. He speaks a language that does not make sense in the world of the play but is connected to the thematic concern with the inability to achieve communication between people. Words in the narrative mean different things depending on who is using them. That the Fool invents his own language is in line with everything that has gone on in the narrative. He shows the arbitrariness of meaning inherent in language (Anthony Thorlby, 1972). Everyone speaks a strange language as far as the other characters are concerned because they interpret things in their own way. The clown is a constant reminder that language is made up of a mumbo jumbo of sounds that only make sense to the user. Because language is the beginning and end of truth, the government has the

power to dismiss the truth of those who have no power.

MARK Deserters are shot. That's military justice.

RAMANA What's a deserter?

MARK A deserter is a uniformed soldier who says Libertashio is dead.

RAMANA But it's true. Papa is dead.

MARK That's merely civilian truth.

RAMANA (Naively) The truth: he is dead.

MARK The law forbids belief in Libertashio's death, whether he's dead or not. Thus he is not dead.(15)

The regime maintains one truth for itself and another for "civilians" because the regime has the power to create any set of meaning no matter how absurd. Ironically this refusal to accept civilian truth is consistent with their behavior in line with the theme of the play. To the villagers Libertashio is dead while the government refuses his death even when they know it to be true.

The very experience of death is challenged by the authorities' language which is made of negatives. All they do throughout the play is to deny any statement made by the

villagers. To the authorities everything is cast in negatives and therefore they are caught up in a cycle of doubt. Their constructed world of meaning ends up undermining them because it asserts nothing.

The whole drama seems to be concerned with the inability to construct objective facts. Even when the characters think they are dead there is still an element of doubt. Language is shown to be the beginning and end of everything. People are thought of as dead because they are said to be dead and they can be seen as alive because language describes them thus. There is no objective way to prove either death or life.

Dr. Portes ... But I'm alive. Either that or I'm dead and alive.

ALEYO Prove to us you're alive.

Dr. Portes It's obvious.

ALEYO Just as it's obvious that they shot us and we're dead.(62)

This seems to suggest that language has reached a cul-de-sac. It has been pushed to its very limits. Language does not communicate any objective facts but only constructs meaning that can be challenged. This is because truth is seen as dependent on the person speaking.

This is also highlighted in the way some characters have problems pronouncing certain words. Mark, the soldier, tries to explain to the villagers why it is their fault the country is a mess only to fail at the last point because he cannot get the right words out.

> ...When there's an election and you go to the... the box... boxing, balling - what's the word? When you have to choose someone ... There are times when this lousy language gives me a pain. (20-21)

Even when one of his colleagues tells him that the words he is looking for are "ballot box", he still can't get it right. Because meaning is arbitrary and can be constructed to suit whoever is speaking people in power are able to justify their actions placing blame on those who are subordinate to them. The soldiers claim to act unjustly because that is what soldiers do. They serve an unjust regime faithfully and if that regime wants them to kill or torture people it is not their place to raise objections. After all, it was the vote of the people who elected the leaders. As Mark points out, "Once you make someone your leader, he makes the laws"(21).

Both the play and the novel can be read as Kafkaesque in the sense that one sees in both the agents of authority, but not any supreme figure in which the authority is invested. In Parenthesis of Blood the villagers are like Josef K in Kakfa's The Trial in the sense

that they are engaged in a frantic search for justification. They are judged by a dubious law-court, where their spiritual search does not fulfill their suffering and struggle. In the end the villagers, like Josef K, are killed without explanation. Estina Bronzario in The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez is also killed by forces of destruction in mysterious circumstances. In both Labou Tansi and Kafka, the narrative strategy points at the inability of language to communicate anything. This in turn creates the sense of a grotesque world. Language at the level of narrative seems to be what the stories are concerned with. The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez endorses Fartamio Andra's maxim in the novel: "they don't realise that a mystery is the best explanation in the world". (p.) This she says against the hunt for explanation by 800 western scientists encamped on the Island of Solitudes, looking for reasons why the coastal cliffs around Valancia and Nsanga-Norda groan as a portent before dreadful events like Lorsa Lopez's murder of his wife.

One can look at the novel as a demonstration of the enigma or magic of life. The author seems to be making the point that no single event can be separated from any other as cause and effect, each explains all, all explain each. It could also be that none explains any, and the only thing we are left with is narrative itself. The novel is a kind of a non-explanatory kind of history of the coastal town of Valancia. The novel also seems to support the view that the text is situated on a particular linguistic level at which only

its own language is adequate. This is a limitation of magical text, whose initial aim was to use supplementation to improve upon the realistic text. However, since it is bound by the limitations of language, the project falls short. Magical realist texts, including those of Labou Tansi, demonstrate that language cannot close the gap between what words signify and the objects signified. However, by commenting on their own internal structure, magical texts are able to partially overcome this problem. The magical text does not shy away from its internal contradictions. It exposes them as it goes along (Simpkins, 151).

The reader, slowly descends into a world where everything, including language, stops making sense. We confront an absurd and illogical universe where sequence is replaced by non-sequence. Like K in The Trial nothing is explained to us. K remains unsure if he is guilty or not. This nightmarish world seems to have its roots in a language that has become uncommunicative. Andre Brink points out that:

> exactly as has happened with the use of words like
> 'false' or 'arrested', wrong will gradually be revealed
> to have shed all conventional meaning it may have had.
> It is like discovering, via quantum physics, that all is relative,
> all is uncertain ... .(190)

Even though language has imprisoned him in his state of guilt, K cannot talk himself out of it. In both The Trial and Labou Tansi's work the reader is constantly directed towards the language of the narrative. Statements uttered in the text must be read as metalanguage, they are exposing the text's own usage of language.

Conclusion

In Labou Tansi's work we find the articulation of an anxiety that is the result of the difficulty of explaining post-colonial politics. The chaotic world that Labou Tansi portrays is such that it cannot be rendered through undisturbed realism. Magic realism and allegory are best suited to narrating the complexities of the postcolony because by refusing to limit themselves to the possibilities of realism they are not trapped by them. Labou Tansi is able to resort to the powers of the imagination as a way of challenging an oppressive regime. The world he portrays is governed by the rules of narrative and not the fictions created by dictators. By presenting an absurd world, Labou Tansi is able to suggest that any attempt at objective truth in such a world is automatically implicated in the absurdity of the world.

Chapter 3

Political Independence as Grotesque Comedy

The aim in this chapter is to examine how Labou Tansi uses humour and the grotesque as subversive tools. I will argue that the use of vulgarity in presenting tragic scenes helps to enhance Labou Tansi's text. The use of the obscene and the grotesque help to jolt people out of accustomed ways of seeing the world. I will also look at how carnival and popular culture is used to challenge authority. I will argue that ugliness and laughter have subversive potential because they are capable of making the dazzling appear ordinary. By laughing, subjects are not merely involved in challenging authority, they become part of a process in which power is contested and produced.

The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez is a kind of fable that seeks to tell the story of a world that has lost all sense of proportion. Even though it is a narrative which is made of moments of satire and humour, the world it portrays cannot be rendered through conventional narrative strategies. The neo-colonial world offers unique challenges to the African writer. As Ngugi (1986) states:

> How does a writer, a novelist, shock his readers by telling them that those [heads of State who collaborate with imperialist power] are neo-slaves when

> they themselves, the neo-slaves, are openly announcing the fact on the rooftops? How do you shock your readers by pointing out that these are mass-murderers, looters, robbers, thieves, when they, the perpetrators of these anti-people crimes, are not even attempting to hide the fact? When in some cases they are actually and proudly celebrating their massacre of children, and the theft robbery of the nation? How do you satirise their utterances and claims when their own words beat all fictional exaggerations? (80)

Labou Tansi approaches this problem by pointing to a need for internal responsibility from African nations. In Seven Solitudes, the author has abandoned realism altogether. Realism is unequal to the task at hand because it can only offer a documentary perspective on a universe that has gone awry. His intention in his work is "to make reality say what it would not been able to say by itself, at least, what it might too easily have left unsaid" (foreword). He uses satire to critique the post-colonial state of excess.

On first reading the works of Labou Tansi, one is confronted by a world that is tragic in its rendition of human actions. The use of humour in both Parenthesis of Blood and The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez by the author might appear out of place in what purport to be serious works. However, if one does not regard comedy as essentially

trivial, then its place in the narrative appears to be powerful. Labou Tansi uses various types of humour, from irony and incongruity, to gallows humour and satire. For him, this is the only way to write, "at a time when man is determined to kill life", as the author says in his foreword to *La vie et demie*.

> I aspire to the vital laughter . . . It is insulting to speak of despiar to humankind. Humankind has to live. And its life, the kind of freedom I am showing it. To live one's life and not die to it. That is possible. Let us dare. (Ngata,132)

Although humour has a different effect from tragedy, there is still a kind of laughter that straddles the edge of pathos. An incident that appears comic, may prove to be pitiful and tragic. Labou Tansi is able to treat a series of events as both comic and tragic by showing how one contains the other. Incidents that appear comic always have an underlying seriousness to them that transforms them to tragedy and vice versa. He is able to achieve a powerful effect on the reader by constantly shifting between tears and laughter. When something tragic is treated in a comic manner, it increases the tension and suggests, "vaguely, a resolution and a purification"(G. Wilson Knight, 1970, 160).

To place something comic next to something tragic is to bring together two things that

appear incompatible. Both are mutually exclusive. Therefore to combine them is to add to the meaning of each. There is a strange dualism at the centre of both Parenthesis of Blood and Seven Solitudes as a result of the incongruities that turn realities absurd, hideous and pitiful. The universe portrayed is full of torture, madness and jovial celebrations that sit uneasily with each other. Incongruity is the special mark of comedy.

In Seven Solitudes there is a dualism that lends itself both to tragedy and comedy. The opening scene of the book comments on the erosion of the autonomy of the African state by the international community. The same scene also highlights the influence of the international community on policy-making in African states. From the start, the situation has a comic aspect. The "pineapple incident" is a brilliant satire of the fragile egos of all the leaders worldwide. Because of a perceived insult, America will not import the country's pineapples.

> We hadn't sold our pineapples that year, because our President had insulted America at the Sixteenth Paris Conference on the price of raw materials. Out of revenge, the Americans refused to eat our pineapples, and the French had supported them by refusing to eat them out of modesty, the Belgians because they understood, the Russians out of timidity, the Germans out of

> simple bloody-mindedness, the South Africans by intuition, the Japanese out of honour . . . Anyway, for one reason or another, the whole world refused to eat our pineapples. (1)

The narrator's apparently matter-of-fact tone belies the absurdity. However, the situation is a very serious treatment of the western world's relationship with Africa. On one level, the humorous presentation suggests that the West does not take African countries seriously. But the fact that this whole incident was brought about because of disagreement over the 'price of raw materials' shows how little control African countries have over their resources. They cannot set prices for what they produce because powerful western countries can dismiss them without a thought. The scene offers a perfect example of western exploitation of third world countries. The powerlessness of the African state is underscored by the humorous and absurd action taken by the local authorities to counter what had happened. All they can do is take revenge against a handful of foreigners resident in the country.

> Instead of giving in, the authorities passed a law requiring overseas residents to eat impossible quantities of pineapples, morning, noon and night, that is three kilos per head per day! (1-2)

The authority had chosen to counter the embargo against them by passing laws that are childish and foolish. The incident is profoundly comic and profoundly pathetic. It is very interesting that this whole incident was caused by a trivial incident. It is the first of the many incongruities to be noticed in the novel. It also points to the reason for the failure of the post-colonial state. The evils of the colonial inheritance are invoked by Lorsa Lopez as he murders Estina Benta, blames it on the whites, who have "mined everything up . . . Their money has killed our soul"(11). The Spanish are blamed for killing the time when "there was no shame between the coast and Nsanga-Norda"(77), implicating the time-honoured "divide and rule" tactics of colonialism. The foreigners in the country blame the Valancians for passing the law that forces them to eat large quantities of pineapples while praising the Nsanga-Nordans as people with sense.

> Foreigners all began to hate us: us, our country and our laws. 'It's those perch-eaters of the coast who dreamt that up', they maintained. 'The Nsanga-Nordans have more sense'. (2)

The foreigners are those who frequent Estando Douma's brothel (22). They are the ones who descend on Valancia, exploiting the earth and hunting for explanations about humankind's origins (18). The narrator says the community blames the current moral corruption on the Whites. However, most of Labou Tansi's satire is reserved for the

follies and vices of the post-colonial state. Bayart locates many of the post-colonial problems in "the continuity of the conflicts of the past"(241). Whatever the causes of the present difficulties, "South of the Sahara `to eat' is a matter of life and death" and corruption is a strategy of survival (241). Bayart gives the example of the Zairean Air-force's exploitation of their situation to trade in petrol and other goods. In Zaire, the informal economy is inseparable from that of the official state and "the strategies adopted by the great majority of the population for survival are identical to those adopted by leaders to accumulate wealth and power" (241). In Seven Solitudes the mayor and his "true copy" (20) the judge, complement their unreliable salaries by selling land which is supposed to belong to "the people", that is to say, to the "authorities". The mayor has been "zombified" by his dependence on money and the fear of losing his official position.

Incongruity is also present in the death of Estina Benta. The end of Estina Benta is horrible, cruel and unnecessarily brutal - the most grotesque horror in the novel. The murder does not last a matter of seconds, it is prolonged. The whole community is aware of the crime, yet rescue does not come at all. It is a hideous joke made worse by the fact that the police are not in a hurry to come and investigate. The death of Estina Benta is the first and most horrible of all the incongruities in the novel:

> The poor woman called for help, and we heard her voice, nearly drowned by her husband's bellowing, as in the days when she sang at the conservatoire: Help me! He's killing me! (11)

The tragedy is most shocking because it is caused by a powerful and unreasonable force. Her husband kills her because he believes she has given him lice. Apparently this was only a rumour that could not be substantiated. People in the community only cross themselves and turn away. Even though they feel sad at the death of Estina Benta, they are more disturbed by the timing of the murder. Most people feel that he could have chosen another time to kill her. Like the pineapple incident, this whole episode is brought about by an insignificant occurrence. A man kills his wife because he believes that she gave him lice. The killing is clearly over the top and cannot be justified by the crime. After killing her, Lorsa Lopez cries, blaming the community for letting him commit the murder: "What a disaster! What wickedness! How could they let me commit this crime?"(17)

The cruelty presented would be less were there not this element of comedy which I have emphasized. The insistent incongruities which create and accompany the madness of Lorsa Lopez, are intrinsic to the texture of the whole novel. The humour has a specific use in the novel. Labou Tansi uses it to empower the victim, as we shall see,

through a tradition of ridicule and fable. The text brings us into contact with horror, but manages to remove our fear of that horror because the narrative underscores it with humour. Laughter is the perfect response because it is a way of refusing to give in to the horror. By laughing at the authority, the victim reduces it and removes its power. The comic in the narrative jolts us out of the field of authority of the world portrayed. Even though Mikhail Bakhtin uses Rabelais's novels to explain the social uses of laughter, his comments are useful in understanding Seven Solitudes:

> Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, . . . Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically.(128)

Seven Solitudes is a text which uses laughter as a way of contradicting established authority. The fantasy created by the narrative refuses to succumb to the rules of the real world. This comes to light in the sequence of events carried out by Lorsa Lopez

as he goes about killing his wife. The graphic description of the murder removes the narrative out of the sphere of traditional realism. In this novel, characters are not presented in a realist fashion. There is a lack of psychological depth to the majority of them. Only Estina Bronzario is a clearly defined character while the others are recognisable by a few traits. For example, most characters share similar names with only a few minor differences either in spelling or in the surname. The scene of the murder, even though it is graphic, could come out of a slapstick comedy. Lorsa Lopez is not presented as a real person, but rather as a buffoon whose farcical behaviour resembles characters out of a cartoon strip. The whole sequence is described in language that suggests a furious and heinous will with little psychological depth. Lorsa Lopez goes through the whole scene without showing an ability to think.

> He cut her up, slit open her thorax, hacked her bones, tore out her breasts, threw away her womb, and took out "your wickedness and everything you kept there to enable you to play such a lousy trick on me. Now you'll pay. You wanted to play cunt. You wanted to play the slut. I'll give you fucking slut."
>
> He went into the pigsty, wiping his forehead with his shirt, red with sparks of blood and flashes of meat.
>
> Came back with meat hooks, hung her right thigh on a palaver tree . . .

> He fetched all the tools from the pigsty: Meat, hooks, picks, forks, felling axe, machetes . . . millstone. He finished off his crime with the pickaxe. (12)

Even though Lorsa Lopez exhibits a lot of active behavior, he is still a 'type' character. Lopez is, as this passage demonstrates, violent emotion and bungling brutish force devoid of all capacity for thought or compassion. Lorsa Lopez in his frenzied attack on his wife is shown to be at the mercy of his passions. It is only after the action that he regrets what he has done. In most instances, the act of killing would confer power to the perpetrator. But in this instance, the narrative presents a struggle between real and surreal, between authority and laughter, and this helps undermine the authority of the perpetrator. The horror of Lorsa Lopez's actions is juxtaposed to the reaction of the town. The mayor arrives only to comply in a matter-of-fact way that he only objects to the way Estina Benta was killed. The murder itself does not affect him. In fact he welcomes it because he hopes it might divert attention away from Estina Bronzario's celebrations.

Sometimes the humour in Seven Solitudes is sinister. We are continually aware of the humour of cruelty and the cruelty of humour. The marriage between Nogmede and the Beauty of Beauties is treated as a grotesque farce. When Zarcanio Nala rejects Nogmede at the alter, he cannot fathom what is happening. Just as his mind begins to

fail, his body begins to reflect his psychological breakdown. His fantastic appearance as he dies reflects the confusion in his mind. His physical appearance is of a vision of a world gone mad. He has just been rejected (in crude and abusive language) by a woman who had claimed to love him. Nogmede is left:

> Celebrating his marriage to shame and humiliation.
> He remained in that position for months, until one
> day Fartamio Andra came and anointed him with oils
> of the theosophist, Larkansa Coma, because he was
> beginning to stink and maggots were coming out
> of his mouth, his ears and his nostrils. (92)

This is a magical realist representation of the grotesque, fantastical and sinister. It is a particular region of the terrible bordering on the fantastic and absurd, it is exactly the playground of madness. The use of magic realism helps to present elements of the plot in stark nakedness. The disintegration of Nogmede indicates the agony suffered by a person who is betrayed. The rotting body of Nogmede is crude and disgusting. But it is meant to be. It helps to provide an accompanying exaggeration of one element - that of cruelty - in the horror that destroys a person. Since, throughout the novel, we have been exposed to scenes of the grotesque, we are well prepared. The comedy in the

death of Nogmede does not give way to laughter. The author has merged plot and incident that we may watch with sadness rather than laughter, the cruelly comic actions of Zarcanio Nala. This recurring and vivid stress on the incongruous and fantastic is not a subsidiary element in Seven Solitudes. It is the very heart of the novel. Nearly all the persons suffer some form of crude indignity in the course of the novel.

According to Bakhtin in carnival, the feast is that which unites space, time and the body. Bakhtin traces the significance of food back to its primeval roots in the hunt and the harvest and conquest of fear. The individual feels part of a community in a "unique sense of time and space"(302). "Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage" (Bakhtin, 281).

Such a feast is prepared by Estina Bronzario to celebrate Valancia's "second phoney centenary" although it has been banned by the authorities. Huge pots of fragrant foods simmer for days, "giving off their tantalising smells and offering glimpses of onion, garlic and vegetables from Nsanga-Norda swimming on the surface... Strings of sausages, heaps of barbecued lamb, mountains of grilled meat, basins of soup, bright-coloured sauces, *Mandella* sauces, picket sauces, lantami sauces, azanio sauces... the

whole Bayou quarter was permeated with the smell of cooking and wine"(6). Women are sewing party dresses and carnival costumes while others practice their dancing.

The carnival is presented as a 'second life' sustained by the common people. It is a culture that engages with and directly opposes the 'official' culture. Estina Bronzario carried out the celebrations against the wishes of the authorities. The feast organised by Estina Bronzario is typical of carnival culture in that it is characterised by large consumption of food. The common people in the novel are shown to have a distinct and separate existence from the authorities. Figures like the mayor do not take part in the festivities. They are always outside and opposed to what is going on. The conflict between the authorities and the common people is also reflected in the animosity between Valancia and Nsanga-Norda. The capital was moved from Valencia because the authorities were at odds with the residents.

Since the celebrations are carried out against the wishes of the authorities, carnival shows that the authorities can never rule completely. The world of carnival is full of people who appear crazy, and whose lives are a constant joyous celebration. Even though the festive celebrations may seem chaotic and without direction, they serve pragmatic aims. It is a manifestation of the collective determination to conserve the authority of the community. People like Estina Bronzario are determined to set their

own standards of behavior and social discipline. She prepares to enforce these standards by means appropriate to her.

The authorities cannot control her even through bribery. They try to make her the mayor of the town in order to make her one of them. But this does not work as she insults and embarrasses them. She represents the spirit of Carnival which is the resistance to arbitrarily imposed forms of domination.

Although the towns' people of Valancia do not participate in elections, they are actively engaged in public life. They always seem to know what is going on in Nsanga-Norda. The common people use the objects of carnival such as traditional songs and stories as a means of communication. These are transmitted and preserved in the oral form. In the novel, songs and stories are shown to have an empowering effect on the listeners. People use them against the hardships of life. They are a uniting force that is able to generate hope and give meaning in a time of despair. Estina Bronzario uses such a song to unite the women against the men after Lorsa Lopez had killed his wife. The women dance and sing lifted by Estina Bronzario's words while she prepares a strange potion made from vegetables. The effect of the song and dance on Gracia is overwhelming and joyous.

> Seized by a tremendous shudder, we began to dance the rumpus of the coast. My body felt light as air, as if I'd been freed from the pull of gravity. At the same time, I was filled with a feeling of absolute pleasure and peace. My heart melted inside my breast. I'd never before felt myself so true. So happy, so at one with everything. (10)

Therefore carnival can be seen as a popular festive form that is able to actualize a desire for a freer and more abundant way of life. The singing and dancing is a way of promoting feelings of communal solidarity. The celebration by the women is a way of dealing with the brutal killing of Estina Benta. Before the dance, Estina Bronzario was all rage. She was at the brink of losing self-control. She came back "from the bayou like a whirlwind, her throat swelling with rage, the white-hot metal of her eyes all bloodshot" (14). However, unlike Lorsa Lopez, she is not a victim of her emotions. She is able to find a more appropriate and positive way of expressing herself. After a brief moment spent crying, her anger subsides and she is able to organise the women into a potent force. After the dance, she organises the women's sex strike. This cathartic action may give the impression that festive forms operate as a 'safety valve' in society. All they do is to give people who are oppressed some way of venting their anger only to be incorporated within the repressive regime. This view is too limited because it sees festivity of the Carnival type as always under the manipulation of oppressive forces.

To view Carnival as a sort of 'safety valve' is to assume that rulers are always in possession of the authority to grant or withhold permission. Estina Bronzario and her women are able to act against authority in a very powerful way. The sex strike affects the men in such a manner that they come begging her to end it. The excesses of festive liberty are shown to have a profound impact on society and affect lasting change (Bristol, 1985).

However carnival is not just a pure frontal opposition to and, a refusal of authority. There is a doubleness to the phenomenon. People who are oppressed use it as a form of escape from reality. For example, we see members of Sarngata Nola's travelling show dressed as kings and princes. The first time they arrive in Valancia the mayor mistakes them for the "real" authorities. But he is disappointed to find out it is just ordinary people in costumes:

> The mayor was disappointed. For, instead of the police, instead of the angels of the Last Judgement, we were witnessing the descent on our town of the ninety-three performers of the Sarngata Nola ballet troupe ... .(31-32)

This masquerading as figures of authority by ordinary people is shown to undermine

"real" authority. In carnival ordinary people can make believe that they are kings or are figures of authority while they do not have that power. By mocking authority through impersonation they become part of a process in which power is contested and produced.

The most obvious element of the grotesque is exaggeration, the material world is presented in extreme terms. Bristol points out that:

> The basic principle of grotesque or Carnival realism is to present everything socially and spiritually exalted on the material, bodily level. This includes cursing, abusive and irreverent speech, symbolic and actual thrashing, and images of inversion and downward movement. (22)

The epitome of the expression of "grotesque realism" is to be found in the pathetic character of the monster Yogo Lobotolo Yambi, the son of the madwoman, Larmani Yongo. The monster Yogo is depicted as part-human, part-animal, part-mineral:

> The monster had seven heads crowned with a brass crest, twelve arms of unequal length, one leg in the shape of a grooved column ending in a sort of elephant's foot, thirteen highly polished jagged

> tusks, with thirteen orifices, four of them shaped like trunks ending in what resembled umbrellas made of solid limestone and which snapped like slow-worms when you touched them. It was said that that these four orifices served as eyes, nostrils and ears. A long pipe-like rod, also made from limestone, and situated at the root of its forked leg, served as its penis ... sexual organ and waste hole. (4)

Labou Tansi treats death as a laughing matter in his works even though it is tragic. The juxtaposition of low comedy with death scenes disrupts the solemnity and fear connected with death. The comic aspect of the narrative always draws attention to the body which is presented in a slapstick manner. In Parenthesis of Blood, the soldiers continually kill each other as a form of obedience to the law. The death of the sergeant is at first shocking and unexpected, but the consequent killing of other soldiers becomes farcical. The death of the soldiers is portrayed as inconsequential; every time one of them is shot, there is a reallocation of authority. The next soldier takes over and continues the process of oppression. Authority is shown as not residing in a specific person , but as part of a social system of domination. The various individuals who enforce the laws are shown to be unimportant in themselves. An individual dies, but social life is sustained despite this local discontinuity. The laughter that comes with the death of the soldiers shows that the death of an individual becomes laughable when that

death is "viewed from the standpoint of the social and biological process as a whole and not from a single, limited interpretation of that process" (Bristol, 185). Even though the soldiers have immense power over the villagers, the destruction of their natural body is accomplished with relative ease. The power that they represent is a lot tougher to destroy.

However, the laughter of Labou Tansi is not used to demonstrate the power of authority but to challenge that authority. He uses irony in such a way that those who are socially superior are ridiculed in order to reveal their absurdity. The play is full of many examples of the idiocy of the soldiers. When they first arrive at the village, they go into a frenzied search for Libertashio. In the end, they are left panting and forgetful. The sergeant who is in charge of the mission cannot collect his wits in time to remember what they are doing. He keeps going back to his second in command Mark and asks him why they are in the village:

RAMANA . . . What are you looking for?

THE SERGEANT Mark! Mark! Help me remember what we're looking for.

MARK (*From inside the house, where the body searches are taking place*) We're looking for Libertashio.

THE SERGEANT (*To Ramana*) We're looking for Libertashio. (12)

Most of the conversation amongst the soldiers is nonsensical. They never give clear answers to anything or seem to really know what they are doing. Like Lorsa Lopez in Seven Solitudes, they consist of violent actions and strong emotions. They are constantly shouting at others to get their points across. They seem unable to think properly as their reasoning is absurd.

One of the funniest but chilling scenes in the play takes place when the soldiers ask their victims to make one final request before killing them.

A SOLDIER (*Insisting*) Your last request, Madame.

ALEYO I have none. I tell you I have none.

THE SOLDIER The last duty of the condemned is to have a last request.

ALEYO And if not?

THE SOLDIER If not, we shall kill you anyway but with . . . With a somewhat guilty conscience. (28)

The soldiers force the villagers to make a final request before killing them, as if there is some worth in it. However, the absurdity of the whole thing is exposed by the request of the condemned.

THE SOLDIER For the last time, Madame, your last request.

RAMANA I'd like to spit in the sergeant's face.
Three times. (*The soldier looks questioningly at Cavacha.*). (29)

The whole scene is ludicrous and comic. It takes away the seriousness of death. However, the comic aspect of the scene empowers Ramana and others who are condemned with her. She is well aware of her position and is willing to go along with their games. The game is asking for a final request from people who they are about to kill. Her response involves the soldiers in a farcical comedy that reveals their lack of reason. Folly in the hands of Ramana functions as a counter-statement to the demands of authority. The author uses comedy to deal with a very serious and sad situation. The whole act of dying seems trivial. The condemned keep on requesting what appears to be unreasonable to the soldiers. Kalahashio's request is rejected because she is dressed in black and white. Her request is to be buried in the clothes she is wearing. Unfortunately, black and white are the colours of the national flag. Then there is Aleyo who wants to marry Cavacha before dying. Her request is granted, but the result is absurd as Cavacha will still kill her.

CAVACHA (*Emptying his helmet*) Take it down! It's her last request.

She will marry me and, and then you . . .

Then we will shoot her. (32-33)

All the condemned use self-ridicule as a weapon to protect themselves against violent coercion. To make a 'reasonable' request before one dies is in a way a recognition of the authority that has passed judgement over you. The villagers refuse to do this by engaging in disrespectful practical jokes that envelope the authority that has sentenced them to death in an absurd comedy. The comedy in the dialogue between the prisoners and the soldiers introduces an element of gallows humour.

The use of comedy and the grotesque does not imply that the author does not treat his subject with respect. Rather, they are used to make us face what would otherwise be unbearable: the painful laugh of the incongruous and absurd in the most pitiful of human struggles with oppression. The language of carnival, of popular culture, serves the cause of parody and laughter that challenge authority. Labou Tansi presents the world as grotesque to express the sense of estrangement from the world. The familiar world is seen from a perspective which renders it strange.

Chapter 4

The Living Dead: Women and the Celebration of the Body

The goal in this chapter is to examine Labou Tansi's portrayal of women in relation to other African male writers. I will argue that Labou Tansi's female protagonist is an improvement on the female characters found in works by African writers regarded as representative of the African canon. In these texts Africa is usually personified as a woman who has been raped by colonisers and the black female is idealised as representative of all that is positive about Africa. I will show that in presenting female bodies that resist male attempts to turn them into battle grounds of their desires Labou Tansi subverts patriarchal domination. Through the use of physical violence male characters try to appropriate female bodies into objects of their desire. I will also show how authority is able to create a fiction of power by using physical pain. I will argue that the resilience of the society is demonstrated in human life being able to overcome the destruction of the body.

Estina Bronzario and the heroic whore

If one considers the large body of fiction that is regarded as representative of the African canon, one detects a distinct male bias in subject matter. It is only recently that women authors are being accorded the status they deserve in African literary criticism.

This is because feminist critics have begun to re-constitute all the ways we deal with literature so as to do justice to female concerns, and values. Judith Fetterley (1978) emphasises the need to alter the way women read male-oriented literature so as to make them not acquiescent, but resisting readers, that is, ones who resist the authors's intentions and design. To be able to bring out to light and to counter the covert sexual biases written into a literary work, women have to resort to a revisionary rereading of male-produced texts. It is also important to pay attention to the images of women found in patriarchal literature. These are often represented as falling into two antithetic patterns. On the one side we find idealized projections of men's desires (the Mother Africa trope that is prevalent in most African male authors); on the other side are demonic projections of men's sexual resentments and terrors (the malignant witch, the prostitute, the destructive sensual temptress) (Stratton, 1994, 44) .

While many feminist critics have decried the literature written by men for its depiction of women as marginal, docile, and subservient to men's interests and emotional needs and fears, I believe that Sony Labou Tansi has managed to rise above the sexual prejudices of his time sufficiently to understand and represent the cultural pressures that have shaped the characters of women and forced upon them their negative or subsidiary social roles.

Most African male writers have portrayed women in their works with varying degrees of success according to feminist criticism. A lot of displeasure has been expressed about the unsatisfactory portrayal of women in one of the most celebrated novels to come out of Africa. A number of feminist scholars like Katherine Frank (1987) and Florence Stratton have pointed out the peripheral position occupied by women in Things Fall Apart. While most of the men in this novel are complex characters, women are either ideals of motherhood or representatives of the values of society. None are well-developed individuals with ambitions of their own.

In The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez Labou Tansi places a female character at the centre of his narrative in order to critique a corrupt male-dominated society. This in itself is not a radical move since a number of male African writers have used female characters to critique the post-colonial state. Writers as diverse as Ngugi wa Thiongo and Chinua Achebe in their later fiction have placed females at the centre of their narratives. Women like Beatrice in Anthills of the Savannah and Wanja in Petals of Blood are used by their respective authors as possible sources of transformation in society.

I intend to argue that Estina Bronzario is an improvement on the female characters found in the realist fiction of these two canonical writers because through her we gain

a clearer picture of the difficulties encountered by an individual (male or female) in the post-colonial state. Estina Bronzario does not fit easily in the image of the African woman found in most canonical writing, for she goes against the grain of the 'Mother Africa trope'. Florence Stratton traces the roots of the 'Mother Africa trope' in Senghor's Negritude movement (39). In the works of Leopold Senghor the idealization and romanticization of motherhood is a recurring motif. Senghor is probably one of the most famous writers to come out of Francophone Africa, he was a founding member of the Negritude movement and president of Senegal for the first twenty years after independence. In most of his poetry, the theory of negritude comes across in the way Africa is embodied in the figure of a woman. The poem "Black Woman" provides a good example;

> Naked woman, black woman
> Clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty!
> In your shadow I have grown up; the gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes.
> And now, high up on the sun-baked pass, at the heart of summer,
> at the heart of noon, I come upon you, my Promised Land.
> And your beauty strikes me to the heart like the flash of an eagle.
> (Senghor, 1979,105)

Stratton argues that one can find the 'Mother Africa trope' in traditional African art forms like oral poetry (40). It is not merely the result of western influence on African intellectuals. She also argues that the trope "operates against the interests of women, excluding them, implicitly if not explicitly, from authorship and citizenship"(40).

It is because of this exclusion that there has been a significant movement within feminism towards seeking better and fuller representations of women in fiction. Even though feminism as a discipline has many diverse strands within it, Alison Jagger (1983) argues that its basic mission is to eliminate the subordination of women in society. However, feminists may not necessarily agree on the methods required in the elimination of that subordination. The discussion of these different strands of feminism is beyond the scope of this study. I will focus on the feminist criticisms of people like Katherine Frank and Calvin C. Hernton (1987) who examine the way male authors fail to attend to the interests and concerns of women.

In predominantly male produced works of fiction, the author is the subject-artist and the woman is an aesthetic object, the repository of the author's meaning and therefore, the woman's function is to carry the vision of the author. The female picture that is inherent in such works is that of mother, sister, prostitute, whore, witch etc. This is precisely

because the woman has come to be defined in relation to men, rather than as her truest-self, herself. Whether she is canonised as a mother or stigmatised as a prostitute, her experiences as a woman are trivialised and distorted (Stratton, 41).

If one looks at the poems of Senghor, the female is metaphorically of utmost value, whereas practically she is a nonentity. Following Senghor, Negritude's value lies in its ability to counter the "myth of the inherent inferiority of the black race" (Stratton, 40). Negritude, in its celebration of African culture, uses the black women as its primary symbol. Stratton points at a manichean allegory at the heart of Negritude which is patriarchal. The woman is always seen as the heritage of African values, values which are an unchanging essence. This type of writing is exemplified by Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino and Ayi Kwi Armah's "An African Fable". The other type of Negritude writing which Stratton calls "the sweep of history" strand, sees the woman as "an index of the state of the nation" (41). This is typified by Nuruddin Farah's From a Crooked Rib.

Stratton argues that these works belong to a "special class within African literature" because in each case "it is the private individual destiny of the female figure that serves as an allegory of the embattled situation of the public ... culture and society."(42) Furthermore, what defines a woman's identity is her ability to produce new life,

whereby she is then celebrated. However, if she fails to bear children this results in her being seen as less of a woman. Fertility and barrenness become a theme surrounding the characterization of the female character. In most African societies motherhood defines womanhood and it therefore becomes crucial to a woman's status in that particular society. To marry and give birth to a child, preferably a son, accords the woman some respect as she will then be addressed as mother of so and so. Children have been made central in the life of the female character.

Labou Tansi attempts to deconstruct the above-mentioned scenario through the character of Estina Bronzario who is devoid of sons but is still able to command a lot of respect from both the men and women in society. Estina is a woman who refuses to accept gender limitations:

> Not only does Estina Bronzario issue decrees, such as the strike against sexual relations, she envisages a new type of woman whose role begins with replacing men. (Harrow, 329)

If one compares Estina Bronzario with Achebe's Beatrice in Anthills of the Savannah, the latter's weaknesses become obvious. Patricia Alden's (1991) reading of the role of Beatrice in the novel sees her, as representing a conservative male view. She is not

placed at the heart of politics but given a role where she can fulfill all the traditional functions. Beatrice and other women in the novel are given symbolic significance as a way of enriching their presence in the text. By representing specific ideals in society they become limited to their prescribed roles of a woman of the people, goddess and prophetess.

Estina Bronzario challenges both the authorities and the men in the text. Her defiance of the laws of the state gains respect and awe amongst the inhabitants of Valancia. She represents the assertiveness of women and refuses to be assigned a particular role in society which is fit for a woman, because for her "women are also men"(34). She is able to transform the most hard-nosed of men through her goodness. Samgata Nola, the superman who had stated that he would free prostitutes by marrying them changed his attitude when his relationship with Estina Bronzario became one of mutual respect. He is seen emerging from the water hand in hand with her (59).

Her ability to organise and unify women gave her a lot of power in Valancia. Through her character Labou Tansi shows how power can be re-adjusted between men and women. Estina Bronzario is almost universally respected for her unbending honour and integrity. "I was born in honor and in honor I shall die," she reprimands the government notary (3). The people of the coast have their honor to uphold, unlike the "meat-eaters"

of Nsanga-Norda. Suffering from the effects of the sex strike she organises, the men of Valancia beg God "to summon [her] to his holy paradise" (44) but Carlanzo Mana and Sarngata Nola respect her strength. She symbolises "the dignity and courage of the people of the coast. All the towns of the Coast, and even Nsanga-Norda, had a Plazio do Bronzio"(63). She is raised to almost mythical stature as she crosses the bayou like a giantess, gazing back at "her daughter, Valancia" (55). Together with the allegorical significance of the water - the sea, the lake, the old harbor - she is identified with the natural universe: sea, sky and rock. By comparing Estina Bronzario with nature Labou Tansi is not resorting to the kind of patriarchy which conflates women with nature and men with culture. For Labou Tansi the natural world is associated with a mysterious power that can have a positive influence on people. Even male characters like Sarngata Nola are affected by nature in a positive way.

She knows she is to be murdered one day. Following the absurdist theme of the novel, she prophesies her future death by saying that one day, the mayor will be waiting for the police to come and investigate the crime of her killing as well.

However, she is not one for compromise. She humiliates Nertez Coma mercilessly. Her granddaughter Gracia complains about her hardness, while the epileptic younger daughter of Elmano Zola shouts out, "To hell with all that rubbish about honour and

dignity"(66). Before Estina Bronzario dies, she has quietly ended the sex embargo. Machedo Palma has had a vision of her after her murder, in which she invites him to know that "hate is over"(110).

The evil forces of destruction, oppression, and exploitation reside in male characters. I do not think that this is resorting to a manichean allegory of gender because Labou Tansi does not merely turn gender roles around. Men do not suddenly occupy stereotypical roles. Labou Tansi only critiques those male characters in positions of power. What he is alluding to here is that power corrupts and since men are the ones in positions of power it is only logical that they should be the ones corrupted. The dark side of human nature, the side that is attracted to the corruption of human values and delights in the massacring of the human spirit and body, is found in various figures like the mayor and the civil servant Carlanzo Mama. For Labou Tansi, no representative of authority can hold on to positive values for long. Self-interest creeps into their actions and they end up abusing their positions of power.

If those in positions of power end up corrupted, those who are powerless often learn empathy because they are dependent on others for protection, and "as subordinates in a male-dominated society, women are required to develop psychological characterestics that please the dominant group and fulfill its needs" (Okin,1990,154) This suggests

why women do not always challenge male authority. In Seven Solitudes patriarchal authority does generate resistance. This resistance is embodied in characters who insist on honor and integrity. The author refuses to endorse any kind of violent rebellion, the heroic characters in his work are always pacifists. Kenneth Harrow points out that the protagonists or antagonists of Sony Labou Tansi's novels are either heroic or villainous. In the novel, which is concerned with women, the heroines "are marked by strength and conviction"(ibid,328).

There is a need for the readjustment of the way in which people think in society. The fact that Estina does not conform to conventional wisdom leads her to bearing the brunt of the wrath of males in society:

> Mak[illegible]er die. She's stopping us from reconstituting the
> Flesh of man. (44)

Labou Tansi succeeds through the portrayal of Estina Bronzario to debunk the myth about women's dependence on the men. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which he is trapped by the language of patriarchy:

> Estina Bronzario's women, as well as Estina Bronzario

herself, were to do the cooking. (19)

This seems to suggest that women will still do what is expected of them. But most importantly he has tried to debunk the false assumption about motherhood that is doing the rounds in conventional wisdom. There is a false assumption of motherhood as joyous, gratifying and fulfilling as though women are inherently units of motherhood or as though women have the innate propensity for the adoration of children. The patriarchal view of motherhood as a natural endowment on women is challenged by Labou Tansi.

Female writers have recognised the need for the creation of a new language. For example Sissie in Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy feels that:

> above all, we have to have our secret language. We
> must create this language. It is high time we did. We
> are too old a people not to. We can. We must. (116)

She recognises the need to transcend patriarchal discourses, failure of which often results in a situation where women are defined in male terms:

> ... when I cannot give voice to my soul and still have
> her heard? Since so far, I have only been able to use a
> language that has enslaved me and therefore the messengers
> of my mind always come shackled. (118)

What Aidoo is alluding at here is one of the major concerns of feminists, that women are taught in the process of being socialized to internalize the reigning ideology (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority) and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination. This is the major failing of Achebe's Beatrice. Even though she is seen as the vehicle of transformation she cannot escape the patriarchal ideology of Achebe's world. Labou Tansi's heroine is a more successful creation because the author completely rejects the patriarchal world of his novel. The universe of Seven Solitudes is shown to be completely absurd and illogical, therefore, none of the values expressed by the male characters could be acceptable. The novel argues for a new way of thinking, an alternative way of life. By using a non-realist mode of narrative Labou Tansi is able to represent feminist concerns better than most African canonical writers. Through magic realism Labou Tansi is able to counter the tendency towards the romantic presentation of gender found in Things Fall Apart. Labou Tansi's narrative style presents a heroine who is able to be both a disruptive and cohesive force in society. Following feminist

concerns, the character of Estina Bronzario is situated firmly in a specific female community. She has a special relationship with other women in the texts that men are excluded from. It is from this female community that she launches her attacks on patriarchy.

Katherine Frank asserts that in African societies barrenness is perhaps the worst affliction (even crime) that a couple can endure (or commit) and it is always attributed to women. In traditional society for a woman to lack reproductive power is to lack all power, indeed to be deprived of her identity and reason for living. Therefore, women are seen as people who have an innate propensity for adoration of children. Estina Bronzario is a compelling example of the opposite of this fallacy. This is illustrated by her reluctance to fetch the triplets of her daughter when their mother died:

> When our mother died, Estina Benta came to fetch the
> triplets at the request of her friend, Estina Bronzario,
> who refused to attend the dead woman's wake. (64)

The heroines of The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez are characterised by strength and conviction. Estina Bronzario's strength of character is epitomised by her leading the women into a:

> Lysistratean strike in revolt against the men when Lorsa
> Lopez kills his wife, Estina Benta, in a fit of jealousy. (Harrow, 329)

Moreover, her defense of the women is not attached to "the sexual-generative force associated with the vagina, but to an enduring sense of justice" (ibid,333). To this effect, men bow down before her in deference, in contrast to the familiar picture embodied in male-produced literature where women are down on one knee, if not both, before their menfolk. The prerogative of women in such characterisations is to flatter the insatiable and fragile egos of their menfolk without much as a by-your-leave.

> Nogmede came and knelt before Estina Bronzario, in
> exactly the same spot where Fr Bona had knelt, and
> begged her to leave poor Nertez Coma in peace, he'd
> been nibbled quite enough already by destiny. (73)

Labou Tansi uses the notion of psychological-double to project the contesting male voices in society. Those who see women as instruments of reproduction,

> A bloody mess which has lost us the opportunity to
> make children ... She's stopping us from doing your

will. She's stopping us from peopling the earth from

Gihon to the Pishon ... .(44)

and those who view women as equals, the voice of whom is insinuated by Fr Bona,

Gentlemen, I am on Estina Bronzario's side, and so too, is god. The vagina isn't an instrument for your pleasure or bagpipes for your spit. It isn't a depository for lice or a passage for squalid transactions. (44)

In such a patriarchal society the female sexual organ cannot escape the male's need to control it through language. Male characters like Sarngata Nola use patriarchal language to define females as a way of justifying their attitudes. He expresses his views on the female reproductive organ as a way of defending his attitude towards the group of women who accompany him: "The vagina, Estina Bronzario, isn't a come-rag. It isn't a fly whisk. It isn't moonshine. It's the will of God in flesh and water" (38). He is putting a metaphoric/religious value to women even as he is objectifying them.

The degrading picture of women that is persistent in most male-produced literature is exacerbated by the fact that men see themselves as the Self and women as the Other.

Bobonzo Inga is a classic example of male psychology in a patriarchal society, from the perspective of which women are inferior because of their Otherness and their function to bear children:

> I beg you, Estina Bronzario, call off the strike. I'm getting old. I must leave a child on this earth, and if you don't call off the strike before they kill you ... .(68)

Furthermore, the fact that Estina Bronzario tries to assert her individuality in a society where social roles are rigidly stratified does not augur well with the patriarchs in society. Their conceptualisation of such behavior is that it is an anathema and out of tune with what is expected of women. The fact that Estina Bronzario is seen as an extraordinary woman is a vindication of the attempts to silence her. What Labou Tansi does in this novel is to restore stature and voice to the silenced, especially to women. Estina Bronzario is a voice of the honor and resilience of women. Therefore, her murder can be seen as an attempt by men to silence her.

Estina Bronzario's conception is that men and women need to join hands so that a new conception of life, a new beginning can occur. The strength of women is encapsulated in the enigmatic Bronzario, her voice allows women to have honor. Her heroic status

as a female runs parallel to the figure of Sarngata Nola. For Sarngata Nola, the most important thing is life and not one's principles. Estina Bronzario, on the other hand, gets her strength and nobleness from her principles. Through the character of Estina Bronzario women are portrayed as life-affirming. She is able to win over Sarngata Nola because of her association with nature. Nature through the symbol of water has magical qualities that give Estina Bronzario strength. Nature is able to work its miracle through her body.

What separates Labou Tansi from the canonical writers is that there is no feminization of Africa in his work. Female characters do not symbolize male honour and glory or his denigration as a person. Political potency in Labou Tansi is not linked to male sexual potency. His struggle is at the level of narrative, where the act of writing becomes a weapon against oppression. Negritude and its use of the "Mother Africa trope" fabricates a gendered theory of nationhood and of writing, "one that excludes women from the creative production of the national polity or identity and of literary texts"(Stratton, 51).

The Body in Pain

As we have seen, in most canonical works the female body is used to express a number of male anxieties. In the works of Labou Tansi the female body is not romanticised.

Labou Tansi does not gloss over the problems of patriarchy. He is able to expose the exploitation of women in polygamous relationships. The female body is commodified through marriage whereby the husband owns the body of the wife. In the text this is exemplified by Sarngata Nola's concubines whom he call his wives. He bluntly states that he "saves them" from being prostitutes, from "passing on lice" to other people - in this instance men. He refutes Estina Bronzario's angry statements that he carts his wives around him like provisions for the journey. He cautions the other men in Valancia against giving his concubines freedom by saying: "What freedom do you want to give them? They sing and dance like your wives, they sleep and get up like your wives, they eat and drink what they like, and like the rest of us here they're waiting for the police. They won't the opportunity to pass on lice ..." (45). This has symbolic meanings in that even though the post-colonial state has been for long possessed by a few elites, who are patriarchal in nature, there is still that element of resilience and resistance, no matter how subtle or ineffective it may appear.

The 'mother Africa trope' inscribes male anxieties on the female body as a way of controlling women. Labou Tansi on the other hand demonstrates how an oppressive regime tries to demonstrate its power through a language of power on the body. Bodies in Seven Solitudes whether male or female are subjected to torture as a way of demonstrating power. Physical pain becomes the visible evidence of great power. The

description of torture in the novel demonstrates the sadistic potential of language (Elaine Scarry, 1985). Scenes of destruction of the human body are dwelt on to demonstrate the vulnerability of the human body, but also to "assert the permanence of life in a body whose human characteristics are no longer legible, except as traces of its mutilation. The body is constantly reconstructed as a living, speaking, and acting character" (Lydie Moudileno, 1998, 26).

This is seen in the text when Estina Benta's body refuses to die even after being "[d]ismembered, disemboweled ... From her bloodless vocal cords came a hard metallic grating sound until two in the morning." The butchery continues. Lopez uses the spade, a pickaxe and his teeth to cut her up. She is heard again, "Help me! He's killed me!(13). Finally we have the implication of the community's collective guilt for ignoring her pleas, "Help me! They've killed me," she calls out each day at the exact time the murder took place. This is a rendering of the idea of a transcendence of biological death. Death refuses to take the protesting students of Baltayonsa. The sea refuses to drown the monster Yogo Lobotolo Yambi despite the heavy iron bar around his neck (4). After throwing himself from the top of the cliff sixteen times, Sacayo Samba complains that "Death runs away from me" (53) before finally finding "salvation" in the mouth of a volcano. Humorously, the student Malconi Senso is "resurrected" after succumbing to death after a boozing competition (69). Carlanzo Mana and Estina Bronzario still have

their say even after death. In this way, the spirit of life triumphs over death.

There is also a foregrounding of psychological death as portrayed in Nogmede's deterioration as he continues to laugh after his shameful rejection by the Beauty of Beauties on their wedding day: "The bones of the arms gave the whole a sad appearance of caricature, while the teeth laughed a big laugh of dead stone"(92). The fact that these bodies refuse to die in a way depicts Labou Tansi's disillusionment with Uhuru. By their mere refusal to die these bodies transcend their social context. The novel thus shows the absurdity of the situation by dramatizing the effect of violence on the people of Valancia after the "seventh" decapitalisation. The masses, having been disillusioned by the kingdom that was, now watch in silence as the disease spreads deep inside. Violence has become endemic and the morality of the nation is degenerating. "Valancia was changing .. the decline in morals, the collapse of all sense of honour ... When the body has it's fill the spirit retreats"(8). It becomes apparent that Tansi uses the body as a metaphor for what goes on in the wider society. He demonstrates the resilience of the society in spite of all the suppressions of human dignity.

Since the dictator's purpose is to enforce silence through maiming and killing, the act of writing challenges that desire for silence. The author can imagine a body that can resist from beyond the grave. According to Lydie Moudileno:

> Although the body persists as a conglomeration of "tatters of flesh", a voice persists. Labou Tansi's hero is born out of horror itself: the transformation of the human "rag" into a half-body that has become indomitable and invulnerable functions, in this sense, like a tremendous blow imagination hurls at the tyrant: the crushed mouth and open wounds come to form a new organ of speech, born of violence, and denying the closure that torture implies. (25)

Estina Bronzario is well aware of her fate but is able to dismiss fear because death is not the end of life. Her identity is not in her flesh, therefore death cannot destroy her. She is the object of the writer's pen which refuses to succumb to terror (Harrow, 333). Her reply to the warnings of her impending murder show a practical understanding. She explains to Anna Maria that killing her will not solve the problems of the coast:

> They think they'll solve the problems of the coast by killing me. They're mistaken. I'll be tougher dead than alive. They'll realise this very quickly. Alive, they can negotiate with me, but dead, I shall be God. (61)

She is not afraid of death because her integrity is such that the crimes of others must be resisted and death as the ultimate threat of change is to be overcome. This explains why Labou Tansi presents such graphic scenes of mutilation. All they demonstrate is the vulnerability of the body, while the voice that persists is testimony to the strength of the human spirit.

The language of domination is meant to silence the victim/rebel but the triumph of humanity resides not in silence (as the ironic title of the book suggests) but in the fact of speaking. The refusal of silence is what reaffirms life. As Moudileno (1998) asserts:

> For Labou Tansi, to go beyond despair means imagining a character and a place where speech is heard and made possible in spite of physical and official laws that declare it impossible. (26)

In addition, to focus on the physical body is to deny people an individual identity. Reducing people to mere bodies is to refuse to recognise their humanity. That thing which gives each individual a unique personality cannot be found in the physical object. People in Parenthesis of Blood are denied the privilege of an identity. The authority of the state is maintained by the physical elimination of all opposition and by the

subordination of the minds to the arbitrariness of the law.This is evident in the refusal to let Ramana confront the capital and testify to the death of Libertashio. Libertashio is a political activist who is being hunted by the authorities.

> MARK (*Laughing*) We've already done that. The capital doesn't believe us. They tell us to search for him, and that's what we're doing. Any number of Libertashios will do. We'll find fifty or a hundred if we have to, as many as the Capital wants. (*Pause*) We aren't looking to find anyone; we're looking for the sake of looking.(*pause*) If you say Libertashio is dead, you're the one we'll kill... .(19)

The state is on a mission to create a world of silence where its authority is never challenged. However, the state realises that it is easy to get rid of the physical body but the voice of resistance continues long after death. As long as the people are convinced that Libertashio is dead, the state is in danger. This is because the death of Libertashio is an accusation of the brutality of the state. Hence the obsession with killing anyone who continues to say Libertashio is dead. Libertashio represents an important ideal that makes life bearable under a totalitarian government and this is why trying to remove him from the minds of people does not help the regime. Libertashio, like Estina

Bronzario in The Seven Solitudes Of Lorsa Lopez has more power from beyond the grave than when she was alive.

The regime only becomes aware of this after he is dead and they use terror to silence people. They are prepared to kill as many people as possible in order to effect a reign of terror where silence will be the order of life. The soldiers believe that if they continue to kill all the "fake" Libertashios they see in people's faces they will end up with the "one they suppose to be real"(19). This non-stop murder of people is also a reflection of the continued murder of both bodies and minds by Africa's dictators.

When the soldiers arrive at the village only to hear that Libertashio is dead they refuse to accept the word of the villagers. At first it appears that only the physical evidence of Libertashio's dead body will be enough.

> THE SERGEANT (*thinking aloud*) his fingerprints. At least his fingerprints. .... The capital takes no one's word. The papers take no one's word. We have to have a death certificate. Death certificates are not based on someone's word, right? (*He screams insults.*) Not on someone's word, you understand! (*Ramana says nothing; the sergeant continues to swear.*) Not on someone'sword! But on

flesh and blood! (13)

However, it turns out the soldiers are not really looking for any kind of evidence. Their mission is torture and they are prepared to carry it out no matter what the truth is. The villagers are unable to stop being harassed even when they profess their innocence. Even when there appears to be sufficient evidence to show that Libertashio is dead the soldiers are not appeased. As it turns out the physical evidence that they sought was just a ruse, what they really were after was to inflict violence. The concrete evidence that they sought in the physical body turns out to be meaningless because Libertashio can be anyone they choose.

The allegorically named Libertashio is more than a physical body, he represents liberty, which is an abstract concept that cannot be tortured. Therefore, the soldiers torture the physical body in order to sow fear in the villagers. This refusal by the soldiers to accept Libertashio's death is a demonstration of their power. To be able to destroy an abstract concept that resides in the human mind, the state has to effect psychological torture on people. The attack on the human body is the state's only way of destroying human hope. By torturing people, they can subject them to psychological suffering. Hence, the language used by the soldiers does not make sense, but is terrifying in its crazy logic. It appears as a power that makes no sense, but can inflict pain on those who dare

to challenge authority.

Despite the many examples in the novel of state corruption and cruelty, Labou Tansi appears to indicate through his protagonists the (at least partial) power of the individuals to make choices that determine the quality of life and the respect they are accorded in society. Nogmede is convinced "that love exists, that you can make something of it in spite of this monstrous existence of ours."(45). Lorsa Manuel Yebo declares that "love is still the one true absolute of life ... and since we didn't want to die, we chose life" (109). Gracia loves Paolo Cerbante despite his disloyalty: "The heart that loves is answerable to the logic of love"(111).

Conclusion

Labou Tansi's portrayal of women is an improvement on women found in African canonical texts because he is not constrained by the manichean allegory of gender. When most male African writers try to empower their female characters they resort to the manichean allegory of gender. However by merely using such an inversion, female and male, good and evil, subject and object, does not resolve the problems of gender. In addition, if idealising women through their bodies only serves to marginalize them politically, Labou Tansi refuses to place a person's identity in their body. He suggests that the human spirit is more important than their physical appearance.

A body that refuses to die is an empowered body. Such a body is able to defy the control of authority. In this form the body holds a political strength that can destroy authority. This is because authority tries to keep the power of this body in check by using pain. But because this is a body that has been conjured up by the imagination, it is also regulated by the imagination (Steven Bruhm, 1994, 9). In normal circumstances pain attacks the body which in turn attacks the self. For example, people are inclined to say 'my body hurts me', and this suggests a separation between the self and body. However, in the 'real' world people are not able to survive the destruction of their physical selves. In Labou Tansi's novel the initial pain felt by the individual is overcome by the power of the imagination. He is able to imagine a life that continues after the destruction of the body.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The initial aim of realism was to use art as a mirror of the world. By committing him/herself to the project of representing life with simplicity and sincerity the realist took it for granted that the world can be perfectly captured through words (Damian Grant, 1970, 64-65). However, a work of art, be it a book or painting, cannot usefully be thought of as a mirror image of society. The movement away from undisturbed realism, is usually the result of the stress on the individual experience, and the individual vision. In artistic expression, this stress sometimes leads to a surrealist mode of narrative. In Sony Labou Tansi's work, the stress of experience leads to a subjective literature. His stories have elements of myth, surrealism, magic realism, and satire. Seven solitudes and Parenthesis of Blood are allegorical tales of life under oppressive regimes

In the second chapter I tried to show that the use of allegory and magic realism presents a complex picture of the post-colonial state because magic realism as a narrative form constantly points to the complexities of representation through language. One cannot reach any objective truth because language is always subjective. In the third chapter I argued that the use of incongruity enriches the portrayal of human experience because the disharmony created by the conflict between the comic and the tragic forces us to

look at the world from a perspective we are not used to. Labou Tansi's use of magical realism is an attempt to enhance through language and the imagination the capabilities of the realistic text. The use of the imagination is an attempt to "supplement reality by heightening its distinctive elements through ideal imagination"(Simpkins, 148).In the fourth chapter I argued that Labou Tansi's portrayal of women was an improvement on women found in most texts by male writers in Africa. This is because Labou Tansi subverts the manichean allegory of gender through his central female character Estina Bronzario

Labou Tansi's works could be seen as an attempt to give form to the unspeakable and horrifying. Its enduring power resides in the artist's capacity to confront terror and proceed to play with it. Fable makes us aware of the "real" world" as one that can be interrogated, that we need not fear the great powers of authority because they can be challenged. In Seven Solitudes the threat of the authorities is diminished, mocked, and even made to look pathetic and hilarious as we see in the spectacle of the decapitalization of Valancia. What Labou Tansi tries to do is to restore respect and agency to the silenced, especially to women.

Labou Tansi's feverish satire strikes many targets, from sexism to colonialism, science, religion, and even literature itself. His wild humour and penetrating perception into the

sources of the violence and greed that so often tear African nations apart represent the complexity of post-colonial states.

Labou Tansi constructs his narratives as fables that allow us to see the "real" world from outside its parameters. The fabulous world portrayed challenges the accustomed way we are used to seeing the world. It is a form of defamiliarization in that it forces us to look at the world from a different perspective. The post-colonial state with its decadence and penchant for violence has numbed our senses towards violence. We have become accustomed to seeing scenes of violence on television and newspapers. Therefore, to give a realistic portrayal of these might not get our attention. Labou Tansi resorts to magic realism as a way of making visible what has become ordinary. Scenes of extravagance and corruption are rendered more visible by their fabulous presentation.

The boundaries between men and women are shown to be man-made and arbitrary. For instance in Valancia the women's sex strike results in new women who refuse accepted gender limitations. Women are able to gain strength and authority by their ability to resist gender limitations. Throughout the novel the pettiness of the men is measured against the qualities of the women. The murder of Estina Bronzario is the result of frustrated male attempts at stopping women from assuming their new roles (Harrow,1994). In Seven Solitudes gender boundaries are dismantled. Women, through

the character of Estina Bronzario become a new being. She goes on to suggest that in the future women will not only pass on their yeast infections, but their names as well.

Women in this text do not occupy a peripheral position but are at the center of the narrative. Unlike most female characters found in African canonical writing Estina Bronzario goes against the "mother Africa" trope. Labou Tansi's heroine could be seen as a decontruction of this trope, for she has no sons but is still able to command a lot of respect from both the men and women in society. Through the character of Estina Bronzario the line between men and women is erased. Gender roles are shown to be the arbitrary constructions of male patriarchy. For example, Labou Tansi does not idealise the female figure. At the same time he is not prepared to gloss over the problems of patriarchy.

The human body is subjected to torture at two levels: the pain inflicted by one character on another; and the acts of bodily mutilation vividly described in the text. Physical pain is used by the torturer as visible evidence of power. However, the narrative strategy is able to undermine this power by imagining a life that is able to outlive its body.

However, the line between male and female is not the only one removed, so too, is that

which provides each individual with an identity, one's name. The name of each chapter in Seven Solitudes is based on each of the principal characters, the first being the victim of Lorsa Lopez, Estina Benta. We only discover that Estina Benta is not her actual name when an attempt is made to name the public square after her. All the explanations given by the narrative voice to clarify the matter only become more and more extravagant. In the end there is no possibility of assigning a name to her. This is one of the principal concerns of Labou Tansi, the difficulty of fixing meaning in a post-colony. Labou Tansi suggests that it impossible to come to an agreement of what things mean therefore empirical solutions to the political problems of society are not possible. Language itself is shown to be unable to communicate any objective truths.

Many African novels use irony as a method to challenge the system of oppression they live under. Because most canonical writers use realism, they stay within the laws of the system and thus mock it from within. In Labou Tansi's work irony is part of the narrative project that undermines oppressive authority, however, from the beginning the fantastical narrative rejects the world it portrays.

Another method used by Labou Tansi to contest and challenge authority is through the use of humour. By laughing at authority, subjects are able to become part of a process in which power is contested and produced. Even though humour has a different effect

from tragedy it is still able to show the poignant side of human vulnerability. By using humour in incidents that appear tragic, Labou Tansi is able to enrich the drama.If we look at laughter as a response to inconvenient and deformed aberrations from the regularity of ordered life then it becomes negative. Labou Tansi does not treat his subject matter without respect, his laughter has a very serious function. He shows us humanity grotesquely tormented but does not want us to be repulsed.

Proper fable is well known for having a moral. It is didactic. However, Labou Tansi's fable resists violently any attempt to read it as exemplar of an orderly moral world. His fable is less certain ethically. The complexities of the world are such that they cannot be explained easily. In this case Labou Tansi seems more certain in his construction of his work of art as an aesthetic whole. He brings into his work outside elements - both western and African - that link the whole to a tradition of metafiction. In one passage after another from the novel and the play, the author forges links with, the bible, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Rabelais and others. Each work appropriates large amounts of literary history.

He is thoroughly committed to his social role. This is obvious in the way his work reflects the light and dark necessities of African life. His works may not be overtly hopeful, but they suggest resilience in the way he refuses to succumb to despair. Labou

Tansi always seeks for a better way of life even when he does not have the solutions to the problems of everyday life. At the end of Seven Solitudes as Nsanga-Norda is submerged under water Lorsa Lopez reassures the older Fartamio that she can now die in peace as the police will never come. The people of the coast value honour, which means choice. Lopez has therefore decided that death would be too easy a solution for him after his terrible crime. His thoughts echo the sentiments of Nertez Coma who had earlier decided that "the most courageous thing is to live [life] to the bitter end"(81). I will let Labou Tansi's have the last word:

> I would like my books to recount reality. I want my writing to contain madness, humour, and tragedy, mixing everything up the same way life does. This is not a premeditated desire. It is a literature trying to take account of existence in its multiple aspects, in the same way the forest mixes them all up. In Europe, everything happens via the mental aspect. In Africa the body, physical movement, have a different significance. So do dreams, and madness. Maybe this is what our "marvelous realism" is. Magic is often taken as the opposite of logic, as if there were no logic in magic, as if logic didn't have a magic of its own.[7]

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[7]Christian Genevier. WWW.mediaport.net

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Author Mashishi, Thapelo.
Name of thesis Narrating post-colonial crisis : the post-colonial state and the individual in the works of Sony Labou Tansi. 1999

PUBLISHER:
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
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