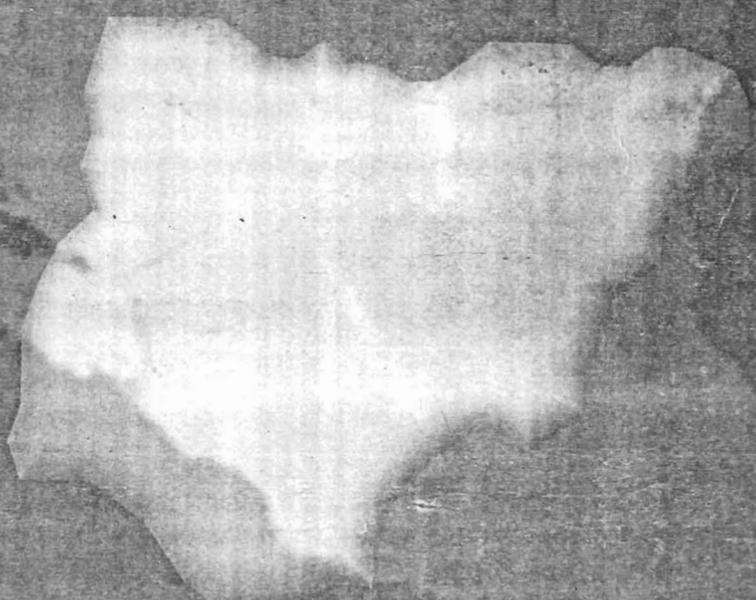


**LOCATING THE  
LOCAL IN THE GLOBAL**  
Voices on a Globalised Nigeria



Edited by  
Şolá Akinnádé  
Modupe Kolawole  
Ibiyemi Mojola  
David O. Ogungbile

## COCKROACH IN THE BATH-TUB: GLOBALISATION AND THE TROPE OF THE ABSURD

GBEMISOLA REMI ADEOTI\*

“The more things change, the more they are the same.  
That is the terrible stability of the world.”

Martin Esslin. *The Theatre of the Absurd* (52).

### Introduction

Globalisation, as it has been well established in scholarship is one of the major developments in international politics after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Berlin wall at the twilight of the twentieth century. It has inspired a considerable amount of interests across disciplinary, geographical, cultural and ideological boundaries. Many attempts have been made to define it both by its propagators and those who do not embrace its ideas. Among its key objectives is the blurring of differences toward the unification of humanity under a common umbrella of culture, economy and mode of production. It also seeks the widening of spaces for popular political participation and free interplay of market forces.

The proponents of globalisation have argued trenchantly about its prospects in minimising sources of conflict among peoples of the world. For instance, Achille Mbembe, in sharing the excitement of globalisation, argues for the “internationalisation of African scholarship” and the rejection of the “nativism” of nationalist scholarship, which he calls “self-ghettoization”. In his words, globalisation is “full of possibilities that African research should seize and exploit. In order to do so, it is of capital importance to find strategies for de-territorializing the production of knowledge about Africa, for de-autochthonizing the ways in which knowledge is legitimated...” (1999:3; see also Mbembe 2000; Sachs 1995; Robins 2004).

But the ideals of universality have not been matched with the reality of inequality in the practice of globalisation. Those who do not share its euphoria have identified among its limitations, the accentuation of differences among nation states and social classes, and the strengthening of the dominance of the West (from where the processes of globalisation flow) over the rest of the world. They have observed that the benefits of its pursuit of a single economy for the globe are still skewed heavily in favour of the developed nations and against the mostly debtor nations of the Third world, especially in Africa. As Zeleza, one of the arch critics of globalisation remarks, “instead of encouraging peace and security and international interdependence, globalization has reinforced inequalities, polarizations, chauvinisms, and conflicts within and among nations” (2003, 37). It promotes Western cultural hegemony and economic ascendancy. He therefore, warns against the “totalizing pretensions” inherent in the concept.

Eskor Toyo expresses the Marxists’ scepticism about globalisation when he labels it “re-colonisation”. He argues that for the underdeveloped world, it portends the

---

Lecturer, Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

accentuation of dependence and poverty. This is evident through "the domination of the economy of the subdued country by the industry and finance of a monopoly capitalist country and the economic, political and cultural hegemony arising from this" (2004, 5).

There is a need, judging from the foregoing, for continuous debate toward the formulation of appropriate responses to globalisation, especially as it relates to Africa in the contemporary era. A scholarly interrogation of globalisation calls for a re-negotiation of the binaries of sovereignty and inter-dependence, sameness and difference and what Roland Robertson describes as "the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular" (1992, 178).

Using insights from dramatic literature, the paper seeks to enhance our perception of the ideals of globalisation vis-à-vis postcolonial African States. This is done through a fresh reading of Al Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach*, a play written from the perspective of the theatre of the absurd. Indeed from the suggestive nature of this theatrical approach, we can realise its relevance to our reflections on globalisation. What kind of philosophical and artistic temper does the theatre of the absurd articulate? What are the links between the dominant thought that inspired this theatrical approach in the 20th century and the current phenomenon of globalisation? What critical insights can we draw from the absurdist<sup>1</sup> aesthetics toward the illumination of the new global order? What are the concrete lessons derivable from the textual exposition of the chosen play for contemporary Africa? What is Africa's contribution to and benefit from the "villagisation" of the globe? These are some of the pertinent questions that the paper addresses.

#### Absurd drama and global ennuui

Globalisation, like the theatre of the absurd, is a product of modernist thought. It signals a de-construction of certain orthodoxy and setting up of new ones. Novelty and a kind of universalism underlie the concepts of the absurd and globalisation. Both seek to empower man to rediscover his universe with a view to coming to terms with the crises of the war era. Here, we refer to the two World Wars with regard to the absurd movement and the Cold War in respect of globalisation. But while the absurdist will give in to despair, the globalist celebrates with delight, the technological breakthroughs in information and communication industry<sup>2</sup>. Whereas, man in the context of absurdity is enmeshed in a *cul-de-sac*, there is an attempt through globalisation to unbind his potentials by the removal of established restraints and a re-construction of social relations across limitless space and time. However, the epistemology of absurdism holds significant lessons for us in formulating appropriate responses to the new global order.

The theatre of the absurd is not a conscious movement but a unique approach to dramatic aesthetics, in its guileless confrontation with harsh realities of existence. The imperfection of man's rationality justifiably gives rise to skepticism about the idea of civilisation, which manifests in annihilative weapons of war, used to eliminate man, their inventor. Absurdism especially its theatre, therefore, arises out of attempts by 20th century writers to creatively react to the reality of existence. In the words of Martin Esslin who has written at length on the theatre, "the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusion – and to laugh at it" (1980, 429). That really is what the absurd drama does when it presents man's existence distinguished by grimness, grotesquery, tentativeness and contingency.

From play to play, the absurdist affirm the futility of human action in a complex world where nothing happens, yet, to parody a familiar saying, "everything is under alarm and there is no cause for control". That accounts for the rejection of rational discourse among other conventions often encountered in realistic drama. Such rejections are demonstrated in the modernist dramatic aesthetics of Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *All that Fall*); Eugene Ionesco (*The Bald Soprano*, *Rhinoceros* and *The Chairs*); Arthur Adamov (*The Invasion*); Jean Genet (*The Blacks* and *The Balcony*); Harold Pinter (*The Room*); Edward Albee (*The Zoo Story*).

These playwrights explore the realm of archetype, symbolism, myth, dream and poetic imagination to depict the ordeal of the modern man in his brutal nightmarish world. They also derive inspirations from philosophical postulations as diverse as the existentialist ruminations of Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. In Psychology, Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious that looks beyond the surface of actuality into the possibility of deeper meaning underlying human actions is quite relevant. Apart from these, the hallucinatory drama of Alfred Jarry, *King Ubu*, the surrealist dramatic piece of Guillaume Apollinaire – *The Breasts of Tiresias* as well as works inspired by French symbolism, dadaism, and German expressionism all provide aesthetic mines for the theatre of the absurd.

In terms of theatrical techniques, there is a displacement of conventions of the well-made play. This is illustrated in language, plot, characterisation, setting and the *mis en scene*. The plays reject the cause-effect arrangements of events in a plot. Hence, linearity is replaced with episodicy or circular plot structure. There is no development of action but an intensification of the initial situation. "This almost classical circular structure provides a representative image of man's absurd existence, beginning nowhere and going no where; but going on and on," writes Hochman (1984, 258).

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* gives substance to the sense of futility through two tramps, Vladimir (Gogo) and Estragon (Didi), who are waiting endlessly on a bare road for an entity called Godot. The identity of Godot is cloudy, just as the essence, purpose and time of his arrival are misty. Yet, the tramps wait indefinitely for this being who keeps deferring his coming while their conditions deteriorate. They propose to leave, but they cannot do so until the curtain falls. The play ends on a point of waiting as it is in the beginning. Its décor is sparse and makes no attempt at realism. A bare tree on a bare road says it all in *Waiting for Godot*, as both buttress the nothingness of human condition in a tragicomic temper. Quite dominant is the assumption that humanity is doomed to a life of irremediable repetitive misery. No matter how hard he tries, man's discoveries and inventions inevitably lead to nowhere other than the starting point in a bid to affirm the nothingness of "being".

VLADIMIR: Nothing you can do about it.

ESTRAGON: No use struggling.

VLADIMIR: One is what one is.

ESTRAGON: No use wriggling.

VLADIMIR: The essential doesn't change.

ESTRAGON: Nothing to be done.

*Waiting for Godot* (21)

Absurdity assumes a tragic dimension in *Endgame*. Beckett's game here is a macabre game that ends the way it starts. The characters are victims of war visibly suffering from the loss of sight, memory and limbs. Nagg and Nell, husband and wife, are rendered immobile in an ashbin. In their immobility, the largely distorted characters pass time talking about the collapse of their world and declining conditions of their being. Their son (Hamm) is blind and paralysed. His slave-friend (Clov) is not left out of the devalued humanity.

However, Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* expresses the author's apprehension of the absurd more poignantly in the degeneration of language. Curiously, the word is considered inadequate to capture the world as a wide chasm is deemed to exist between language and the reality it is supposed to convey. We are confronted with hermetic ethos of the new machine-centred civilisation where man is more or less a grotesquery that generates mirth alongside horror and indignation. Rational discourse yields ground to clichés, futile repetitions and child-like patter among adults in *The Bald Soprano*, all in a bid to "undermine and mock complacent notions about the world" (Hartnoll and Fond 1992: 50).

Dubbed "anti-play", *The Bald Soprano* presents Mr. and Mrs. Smith who are joined later by Mr. and Mrs. Martin. The couples exchange banalities. Strangely, the play ends with the couples changing positions only to begin the cliché-laden dialogue afresh, exactly as it sets out earlier. Nothing is concluded. This reminds one of the fundamental principle of As philosophy in Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*: "As Was the Beginning, As Is, Now, As Ever Shall Be..." (1988: 289).

#### Al – Hakim and Vistas of the Absurd: the African Paradigm.

In spite of its exaggerated sense of despair, futility of existence and the dangers posed to the advancement of civilisation, the theatre of the absurd is enduring in its attempt to capture human reality. Its characteristic endowment with multiple layers of meaning through the use of symbols, and poetic images makes an absurd play ever fresh. They are topical, yet timeless. Their meanings, like the essence of life they depict, defy full apprehension; hence, they yield new possibilities in terms of signification, almost with every reading. Their symbolic and sometimes allegorical framework makes them relevant not only to the historical era that produce them, but also to that which precedes and that which comes after their production.

The absurd drama speaks warningly to the 21<sup>st</sup> century man, just as it confronts the 20<sup>th</sup> century with its enormity. It is still relevant: as the world haltingly steps forward to embrace globalisation and its package of cultural pluralism, free market economy, liberal democracy, borderlessness, ahistoricity, vanishing frontiers and suppressed nationalism.

Socio-political developments in history that furnish the psycho-social temper articulated in the theatre of the absurd are not limited to Europe and America in spite of the fact that it is meant to depict the conditions of post-World War Europe. Among defining elements of the contact between Africa and the West beginning from the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the trans-Atlantic slave trade characterised by forceful dispersal of African population to Europe and America. That lasted for almost four centuries (1441-1850). The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the abolition of slave trade. While thousands of slaves could not survive the agony of trans-Atlantic migration, thousands died on plantations in bondage. The partitioning of Africa among European powers like Germany, Britain,

France, Portugal and Belgium followed on the heels of slave trade abolition. A century of colonisation in Africa after the Berlin conference of 1884 was attended by exploitative exploration of native mineral/agricultural resources, forceful seizure of land, violent repression of anti-colonial resistance, undermining of indigenous African culture and imposition of a foreign mode of governance.

By 1948, shortly after the Second World War when the concept of the absurd was crystallising in the theatre in Europe, the Nationalist Party took over power in South Africa. It undertook policy reforms like Racial Segregation and Forced removals, Restrictions on Political Activity, Restrictions on Trade Union Rights, Bantu Education, Pass Laws and Bantustans (see Pampallis 1991, 179-190). All these accentuated racial difference and inequality, toward ensuring the domination of majority blacks by a minority White regime in a state of separate development ('apartheid').

In a way, the disillusionment associated with the prevailing order of unrest during and after the war in Europe as well as the yearning for a new world of freedom somehow register in the nationalists' agitation for independence of colonies in the 1950s and 1960s. Sadly enough, four decades after political independence of many African nations, forces of colonialism cannot be said to have receded to allow true liberation from European domination. Colonialism remains within earshot, manifesting in the form of neo-colonialism. The hope for democratic development nurtured by independence struggles soon gave way to military dictatorship and repressive civil rule. Terrible ethno-religious wars have not abated in Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra-Leone, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Algeria and Congo. The battle for survival becomes more and more precarious by the day, in the face of rapid contraction of the State. In essence, Africa provides much material for a writer who subscribes to the absurdist viewpoint as the continent emerges from slavery to colonialism, neocolonialism and now, globalisation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that although its popularity diminished in the 1970s, the theatre of the absurd appeals to and influences some African writers in their bid to reflect African conditions. Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*, for instance depicts the grotesque depth of absurdity to which man can sink in a war situation, which is produced in the first place by the collapse of logic. In such a situation, an ambitious man like Dr. Bero bestowed with absolute power poses danger to humanity. He desires to transcend all social restraints. Murder and cannibalism in the circumstance lose their horrifying potentials. As Bero puts it: "Power comes from bending Nature to your will. The specialist they called me, and a specialist is – well – a specialist. You analyse, you diagnose, you – (*He aims an imaginary gun.*) – prescribe" (Soyinka 1988, 247-48). Military and civilian dictators who govern many post-independent African nation states are re-created in Dr. Bero. It would be recalled that *Madmen and Specialists* is inspired by the experience of Nigeria's civil war of 1967-1970 on the one hand and Soyinka's detention for two years without trial by the military government during the war on the other.

The assiduous celebration of the trivial typical of governmental business in national and international fora engages the attention of Ola Rotimi in *Holding Talks*. Interestingly, Biyi Bamidele-Thomas, a younger Nigerian writer explores the overwhelming sense of stasis in the theatre of the absurd in his play, *The Rain*. Another African dramatist who employs the theatrical conventions of the absurd is Tewfik (or Tawfiq) Al-Hakim, an

Egyptian dramatist. Some of his relevant plays are: *The Tree Climber*, *The Song of Death*, *Not a thing out of Place* and *Fate of a Cockroach*.

The ever-widening gap between the haves of the North and the have-nots of the South as well as the heightened feeling of *déjà vu* inspired by globalisation necessitate constant revisiting of what it entails for marginal entities in Africa and the centres of imperial powers in Europe and America. We need to state at this juncture that we share the "nothing-new" theory of globalisation. Globalisation is not entirely new, neither is it unprecedented. It may, therefore, not be different in outcome from previous developmental propositions in postcolonial African States. This is the tenor of our re-interrogation of Al Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* in this paper. We try to look beyond the superficiality of universalism in a global order marked, ironically, by increasing individualism and inequality.

Al-Hakim creates meaningful conversation in place of clichés. But situations and characters in *Fate of a Cockroach* illustrate the characteristic "much motion without movement" associated with absurdism. His exploration of the mystery of being is open to robust critical interpretations. Anxiety, uncertainty and despair are all registered in the mood of the play.

The kingdom of cockroaches, which is a symbolic representation of a human society, arguably provides man with a reflective platform for representing imperfections in the socio-political organisation that man has evolved over time. The cockroach community is shown as being absurd to the extent that it is yet unable to resolve the antinomy of freedom and social obligations. The feeling of helplessness perceived at the beginning is merely blown up in the course of the plot and no concrete solution, though many proffered, emerges at the end. This profoundly underscores the notion of sameness that the absurdists' arts celebrate.

When the curtain rises, the ants pose a threat to the cockroach kingdom. The latter is disturbed by the risk of extinction that the former's aggression poses. Well-organised army of ants always swoops on a helpless cockroach that falls on its back, kills it and drags it off to their territory amidst singing and dancing. The Minister's son is the latest victim. What is catastrophic to the cockroach community becomes a source of ululation in the colony of ants. The primordial hostility between the two communities defies all solutions. A monarchical system complete with cabinet ministers by the cockroaches could not stem the aggression of ants who ironically are smaller in size but better organised. Their communal social formation contrasts with the individualistic, almost hermetic life pattern of the cockroaches. Interestingly, the cockroaches perceive themselves against the ants' inferior "other" as "the sturdiest" and "the most superior creatures on the face of the earth"<sup>3</sup>.

The self-acclaimed long-whiskered king of the cockroaches and its cabinet lack a viable solution to their predicament. The formation of an army of cockroaches as suggested by Minister (the politician) is dismissed as ahistorical. The call for sacrifice and prayer by Priest (spiritual leader) is equally regarded as a "tiresome" option. The benefit of historical experience offered by Savant (the scientist) is found unacceptable. The cabinet meeting at the end of the day achieves nothing useful. No solution is considered practical or scientific enough. They all find reasons to justify their option of inaction, in confronting the problem of ants' aggression. The king argues that a king rules and does not fight. The scientist contends that a scientist makes research and does

not brawl. The same goes for the priest who prays and does not fight. The Cockroach King clearly captures the situation when it remarks: "You have therefore arrived at solving the problem, by presenting us with another problem" (22). The Queen is equally pungent in expressing the absurdist temper in the search for an answer to a national question for the cockroach when it concludes:

We have in short ended up where we began, that is to say at nought... Our meeting, our discussions, our investigations have all led us to nought, nought, nought! (FC, 22).

Science seeks after truth and knowledge about the cosmos. But in the play, science not only fails, it also begets tragedy, the death of the Cockroach monarch. It is the empirical quest to "familiarise itself with the unfamiliar world" behind the shining wall of the bath tub that drives the King, encouraged by Savant, to climb the cliff of tragedy. Its feet slip into the dry empty bath-tub and it becomes difficult to climb back to the top. According to Samia, "no sooner does it start climbing than it slips and fall" (35). It repeats its attempts to climb to the top "dozens of times", but each effort ends up predictably at the bottom of the bath, the same spot where the struggle begins.

A cockroach struggling interminably for its life attracts the attention of Adil and Samia in the second and the third Acts of the play. While Samia is bewildered and/or repelled by sight of the Cockroach, Adil, her husband is fascinated by its archetypal Sisyphean efforts at climbing the bath-tub to the top (see Camus 1956). The human couple, like the Cockroach royal family, always quarrels over trifles mostly, with all the seriousness they can muster. Indeed, in Act I, the cockroach royal couple, always disagreeing over everything, prepares us for the querulous relationship between Adil and Samia in Acts II and III.

It can be deduced from the play's pattern of symbols that the wall separating the human world from that of the cockroaches and the ants disintegrates in Acts II and III, just as the New World Order demands a collapse of established orthodoxy. Interconnectedness is achieved with the unspoken communication between the Cockroach King in desperate need of help and Adil who watches with sympathy, amusement and caring aloofness. Describing the Cockroach as "the very core and essence" (47), he derives a kind of psychological upliftment from contemplating its tribulation. As indicated in the stage direction:

*All this time Adil has been in the bathroom engrossed in watching the cockroach. He makes gestures to it as he follows it climbing up and falling down; by sighs and miming he expresses all his emotion and concern.* (FC, 40)

An affinity between Adil and the Cockroach is implied when his wife describes him as a "parrot". Adil in the bathroom repeats Samia's words like a parrot and Samia in frustration remarks:

There is no longer any point in speaking to that creature. He just repeats my words like a parrot. We've now got a cockroach and a parrot in the bathroom! (FC, 41)

In a subtle act of de-territorialising, Cook recognises the existence of other claimants to the space of the house when she says: "however much you clean a house, it's bound to have cockroaches and ants" (FC, 40). Samia on the other hand is more comfortable with a preservation of traditional boundaries, devoid of contestation for her space and supremacy. Since the globalised universe is a multi-cultural society, the above illustrates pluralism associated with the New World Order.

One legitimate question that arises from this paradigm is the type of relationship that exists in the socio-economic, political and cultural space being contested by these living beings.

Through the cockroach/ant antagonism, Al-Hakim creates a kind of bipolar universe, which anticipates the Cold War era. Besides, he also creates a relation of inequality, which strongly implicates the binaries of the privileged and the underprivileged, the dominant and the dominated and the haves and the have-nots. These have remained, to date, features of globalisation. The triumphant celebration of ants carrying a cockroach corpse sharply contrasts with the glum silence and stupefying postures of surviving cockroaches.

The picture of the Cockroach King struggling futilely to escape the precarious marginality of the empty bath-tub into the larger (global) space outside the bath is significant. It symbolises the so-called Third world nations especially Africa as it rolls from trans-Atlantic and trans-Sahara slavery to colonialism, political independence and neo-colonialism (or recolonisation). Hopes of economic prosperity and social development in a democratic polity remain largely yet to be fulfilled. In some cases, the hopes are receding beyond the horizon of possibilities in a manner that makes the pomp and pageantry of independence the proverbial tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. The Cockroach's struggle, therefore, represents Africa's long struggle for genuine liberation, a struggle that has largely been attended so far by little success.

In Act II, the Doctor, a supposed specialist who comes to "rescue" Adil is also caught in the mesh of absurdity as he joins issues in the domestic dispute. To him, the Cockroach's heroic struggle in the bath is "in reality an entertaining spectacle" (FC, 69). Of course, much news about Africa often aired on metropolitan print and electronic mass media like *Time magazine*, *Newsweek*, Cable Network News (CNN), Voice of America (VOA), Sky News and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), is often about spectacular stories of wars, ethnic cleansing, genocide, famine, industrial crises, election manipulation etc<sup>4</sup>. The Doctor underscores the absurd orientation of the play when he incongruously prescribes a three-day sick leave for Adil who is in splendid health – a wrong measure for an incorrect diagnosis. Trapped in the web of incongruity, how can he see the point that the Cockroach in the bath is the object of Adil's "strange" behaviour and its attendant domestic unrest? But his intervention is not without any gain after all. It stops, however briefly, the vehement argument between Adil and Samia. Samia gives a semblance of submission to her husband for the first time. The battle of the two sexes for supremacy begins again towards the end. This recalls the relationship between the king and the Queen of Cockroaches in Act I.

The Cockroach King eventually drowns and floats when Umma Atiya fills the bath with water. She takes it out and casts it away. The most dreaded has happened – the death of king Cockroach. Its corpse ends up in the jubilant procession of ants, just like what

befalls the Minister's son in Act I. This points to the fact that whether in the hands of the troops of ants or in the hands of human beings, the fate of the Cockroach is predictably unpalatable. But as the ants are taking the corpse of the Cockroach king across the wall, all of them are wiped out; signifying a *tabula rasa* slate on which new realities are to be inscribed. The play returns to the gender struggle initiated at the beginning, when Samia begins to order Adil around. This is an unpleasant situation that Adil detests. He calls on the Cook to bring rag and a bucket of water to "wipe him out of existence" (76), just like the Cockroach King and the ants. Consequently, the play ends without resolving the conflicts that it generates. One of them is the threat of extinction that the ants' aggression poses to the Cockroach community.

In Samia, the playwright depicts a conceited super power that has no sympathy for the sub altern in its dominance and aggression. She seeks to eliminate the Cockroach in order to maximally access the territorial space of the house. She has a kind of privileged imperial posturing, which not only undervalues and rejects the "Other", but also imposes its order of the universe on the margins. One can decipher in that image, the uneven power relations inherent in globalisation.

Adil is ambivalent. He sympathises with the Cockroach's predicament, but will not do anything concrete to come to its aid. This suggests the ambivalence and unpredictability that characterise relationships between nations of the developed North and developing South. The couple also creates the experience of bipolarity typical of the Cold war. Both sides of the ideological divide in the war are unable to rescue the struggling Cockroach (Africa) from its predicament.

**Concluding Remarks: Africa, Globalisation and Theatrical Prognosis of the Absurd**  
The focus of Al-Hakim's play, if one may reiterate, is the Cockroach's struggle to rescue itself from imminent ruin and to reach out to the larger world in order to overcome its ordeal. The trope of futility embedded in the formal structure of the play and in the paradigm of a struggling Cockroach is the kernel of this paper's submission on the idea of globalisation as it applies to contemporary Africa.

Globalisation actually accentuates inequality in the conditions of existence in the Third World and the so-called Group of Seven (G7) nations<sup>5</sup>. Yet, the former tries to imitate Caucasian practices without deep considerations for local conditions. What is being globalised largely are the culture and technology of Europe, America and Asia. Africa is still marginal to the politics of globalisation, as it had been in the intercontinental relations from the era of slave trade and colonialism. The continent is confronted by drought, famine, epidemic, poverty, religious bigotry, illiteracy and political instability. Herein lies the limits of globalisation.

Many African countries are bogged down by debts owed to developed countries of the West while structural adjustment programmes of International Monetary Fund and World Bank drive their economic policies. The rolling back of the State or what can be described as Government's piecemeal abdication of social responsibilities to citizens under the globalisation policies of structural adjustment and deregulation have exacerbated unemployment, crime and insecurity, culminating in low life expectancy. It has also widened the gap between the rich and the poor both at individual, national and trans-national levels.

Arising from the foregoing, it is our contention that globalisation in spite of its euphoric acceptance in some quarters, does not hold the same prospect(s) for the metropolitan nations of the West and the nations of the margin, especially in Africa. It therefore, behoves Africa, its scholars and leaders to be cautious in embracing globalisation and its appurtenances. It has been well acknowledged that globalisation has not improved the lot of citizens in most nations of the Third World, especially, workers and peasants who are constantly exposed to economic insecurity, social dislocation, and political turmoil.

In another vein, globalisation somewhat imperils democratisation as many of the reforms associated with it are imposed, forcefully, sustained and resistance to them often violently suppressed by the State. Consequently, the epistemology of globalisation in relation to contemporary Africa somewhat evokes a feeling of *déjà vu*, in spite of its much advertised dividends. Its structural reforms are not all that new. The continent has travelled this thoroughly familiar path before, leading everywhere but to nowhere in particular. It is hardly different from the starting point of the dominant West and the dominated rest or the privileged imperial powers and the subaltern of the colonised spaces. We agree with Zeleza that "the world has been globalizing for a long time, that the intensity and extent of international interactions across continents, countries, communities and cultures has been growing – amidst setbacks and strife – for centuries" (2003, 14). The interactions only increased at the end of the Second World War and the Cold War. The path of globalisation is a familiar path that humanity of Africa has been treading from the time of Dutch and Portuguese explorers, to European slave traders, missionaries, colonial officers and now to neo-colonialists.

From the evocative nature of the theatre of the absurd, we can see the relevance of the cockroach symbolism in our reflections on the Post-Cold War global order. The fate of Al-Hakim's *Cockroach in the bath-tub* is quite significant as a metaphorical representation of contemporary African reality discussed above.

Truly, the pressure of inclusion is rather too strong for the continent to ignore, especially in the realm of culture, technology, performing arts, economy and religion. In spite of this, an ecstatic plunge into the dance is likely to court disaster in the ever-widening arena of globalisation. It would be like participating in a game where the rules are contingent, made by players of one of the competing teams to which the umpire belongs. As yet, Africa still remains the home of raw materials, debtor nations and avid consumers of Western goods. The economy, culture and technology that propel the engine of globalisation are largely not the product of Africa, and are, therefore, alien to its control.

The critical question is that what is or what will be Africa's authentic contribution to the putative universal pool of the global order? According to a Yoruba proverb, *ajooje ko dun, b'enikan ko ba ni, ojo a ba ni la n s'ajooje* (sharing is unpleasant, when a party is lacking, when all parties contribute, sharing becomes more dignifying). Globalisation would be really meaningful when Africa recognises and addresses its marginality to the scheme. The continent's continuous "Otherity" to the metropolitan centres of power where the engine of globalisation is located, is inimical to the ideals of universality and equality.

One way to proceed is for the continent to come to terms with its past and present, symbolically depicted in the empty bath-tub. Globalisation is aptly symbolised in the

Cockroach's struggle to leave the bath-tub, transcend its slippery frontiers and relate to the world outside the bath. It can achieve these objectives if it recognises its potentials as well as its constraints. Instead of uncritical embrace, therefore, Africa should transcend its present dependence and consumerism and think of what would be its contributions to the global order which, at present, is heavily skewed in favour of the West.

The Humanities as a field of social inquiry has an enormous responsibility if the continent is to fashion appropriate responses to the imperatives of globalisation. Drama is a medium through which man seeks to master, reinvent, comprehend and mediate the conditions of his universe. Its sources are as diverse, just as its defining elements are complex. Through drama, we can illuminate and come to terms with the challenges of "being" both in historical and contemporary contexts. This theoretical assumption underlies the critical analyses of Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* in the paper, with the hope that it would enrich our understanding of globalisation as well as its prospects and pitfalls.

#### Note

1. Absurdist is used here loosely to refer to writers, artists, dramatists and philosophers who subscribe to the worldview and artistic conventions associated with the theatre of the absurd.
2. The technological breakthroughs that propel globalisation are evident in electronic mail, international network of computers, facsimile machine, cable television etc. All these facilitate multiple, instant and simultaneous communication around the globe.
3. Tewfik Al-Hakim. *Fate of a Cockroach and Other Plays*. London: Heinemann, 1973, p.21. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and are acknowledged in the essay after the abbreviation - FC.
4. This is not to suggest that there are no programmes in these media that positively project the African world, its people, culture and politics. But the unpleasant images seem to recur more frequently.
5. The Group of Seven (G7) nations include Britain, Canada, China, France, Germany, Japan and United States of America. The group is also called Group of Eight (G8) with the inclusion of Russia. The invitation as observers extended to Nigeria and South Africa at its 2004 summit at Davos, Switzerland may be seen as an attempt to widen the space of participation in its activities. But that has not really shortened the gap of inequality between the G8 members and their "Guests" from Africa.

#### Works Cited

- Al-Hakim, Tewfik. *Fate of a Cockroach and other Plays*. London: Heinemann, 1973, 1-76.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. London, Faber and Faber, 1958.
- Boelmer, Eleke. *Colonial and Post-Colonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. London: Penguin Books, 1956.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). London: Penguin Books, 1980.
- Hartnoll, Phyllis and Found Peter (eds.), *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*. Oxford: OUP, 1992, 20.

Hochman, Stanley (Ed.). *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama: An International Reference Work in Five Volumes* (Vol. 5). New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984.

Mbembe, Achille. "Getting out of the Ghetto: The Challenge of Internationalization" *CODESRIA Bulletin* 3 & 4 (1999), 1-2.

\_\_\_\_\_. "African Modes of Self-Writing". *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1 (2000), 4-19.

Pampallis, John. *Foundations of the New South Africa*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1991.

Robertson, Roland. *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage Pub, 1992.

Robins, Steven. "The (Third) World is a Ghetto"?: Looking for a Third Space Between 'Postmodern' Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Nationalism". *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1 & 2 (2004): 18-26.

Sachs, Jeffrey. "Consolidating Capitalism". *Foreign Affairs* 98 (Spring 1995): 50-64.

Soyinka, Wole. *Six Plays*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1988, 221-293.

Toyo, Eskor. "The Imperative of Anti-Recolonisation Struggle". Unpub. Keynote address, Calabar: University of Calabar, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

Zezeza, Paul Tiyambe. *Rethinking Africa's Globalization: The Intellectual Challenge*. Vol. I. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press Inc., 2003.