

The Representation of Bereavements: A Surrealistic Analysis of Surviving Dead in Adrienne Kennedy's She Talks to Beethoven

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ABSTRACT:

This study divulges the connection between the living and the dead individuals. Although the dead separated from the world of the living, they were unconsciously linked and remembered by some of the living people. The personal grief is the calamity that generates an expressive consequence to interrupt the person's appropriate choice of the surrounding objects. Adrienne Kennedy, in *She Talks to Beethoven*, examines the furtive motives that dominate and govern the individual's thinking and behaviour throughout a certain critical state of mind.

Key Words: Kennedy, bereavement, surrealistic, the dead, Beethoven, Suzanne.

1-1- Adrienne Kennedy: A Biographical Sketch

Adrienne Kennedy (1931--) is one of the boldest African-American playwrights who successfully exploit the theatre to portray their own insufferable difficulties. She is renowned for utilizing [surrealism](#) in her writings, which frequently characterized without plot and highly symbolic. Her essential concern is initially focused upon depicting and representing the [African-American](#) troubled relations. Kennedy has been extremely creative and has viewed her work fashioned by many varied theatre companies in the United States and Europe (Gray 2004: 688). Most of her works examine the problems of racism, prejudice, injustice, and opposition in American society which is described by other white playwrights as an ideal country. For her, drama represents a social action not only as a work of art away from reality (Krasner 2005: 58). Additionally, her plays offer an expressive reflection to disclose how the past is secretly lived. From Kennedy's point of view, the past is something that should be accumulated and interpreted. She is prominent in applying signs and symbols to enhance her language. Actually, Kennedy looks calm when she writes to be away from prejudice and unfairness. She is as calm and thrift in her oral word as she is in her discussion. She "remains beautiful and mysterious to me in her physical being as well

as in her writing, and the mystery creates a kind of glamour.” (Harrison & et al 2012: 99). Consequently, “critics have associated Kennedy with European absurdist because the form of her plays is filled with symbols and repetitive language.” (Krasner 2005: 232). Using such technique in writing demands experienced and intellectual audience to comprehend the playwright’s purpose and intention.

In this regard, Jenny Spencer (2012:20) affirms that such collection of prolific “critical perspectives points to Kennedy’s radical openness but also suggests that her work is difficult, without scholarly intervention, for audiences to understand”. Similar to her characters, audience stay in restless expectation of unexplained and surprising events, try to recognize things occur around them. For this reason, the viewer remains at his best to know what is going on in the playwright’s mind of ideas that he should present. Moreover, what makes the idea more complicated is the playwright’s attempt to create a close harmony between the living and the dead through using the strange dialogues and situations. Moving between the living and the dead by using surrealistic technique in presenting the individual’s deprivation, produces a sense of pleasure and fear at the same time. Consequently, Philip Kolin (2005: 4) argues that Kennedy confirms that “for over 40 years she has been writing shocking, surrealistic plays that have radically departed from realistic/naturalistic conventions. Her plays are nightmares about a chaotic world of shifting locations and selves”.

It is true that there is no way to comprehend the dead existentially or epistemologically to the extent that even the most potent philosophers were not able to make sense of this enigma. Death in its basic sense is perceived in two types, the separation of a soul from the body, and the declining of knowledge, light and science, and the human mind. As a substitute, ignorance, darkness, and whims are replaced to direct the human beings’ thoughts and activities. This study highlights a very important issue, understanding the connection between the living and the dead. Although the dead detached from the world of the living, they were instinctively associated and memorized by the living individuals. The personal heartache is a catastrophe that creates emotional effects to disrupt the individual’s proper judgment of the enclosed objects.

Essentially, the death of a loved one causes a profound misery, emptiness, and despondency. This idea can be really depicted in Kennedy’s play to trigger the audience’s minds. Philip Kolin (2005: 32) proposes that “Kennedy deliberately breaks open imaginative space for her protagonists and invites the spectators, in a similar manner, to enter her plays on their own terms”. Undoubtedly, the

playwright's task is great particularly in making a direct conversation between the dead and the living

Bereavement is the time of an anguish and sadness after a death of the dearest one. When one feels sad, it is an indication of the usual course of responding to a deprivation. Thus, the person may have a psychological, physiological, and unsystematic reaction of grief. It is noted that if sorrow is suspended and not characterized, it will cause a gloomy shock to an afflicted person. The bereaved may experience seclusion in his/her distress and require the aid of family, friends, and neighbours to alleviate his agony. The bereavement implicitly depicted by Kennedy is everlasting since it takes various shapes to inspire both the people who love and the person who is loved. Indisputably, Kennedy stays as one of the mainly bold "African American women playwrights for both her dramatic techniques and her representation of history." (Kolin 2007: 80). Her boldness is exemplified in depicting the white brutality against the black people not only in American but all over the European countries. Boldness in portraying the suffering of individuals requires the availability of irrefutable evidence that prompts the viewer to believe what he reads or watches.

1-2- *She Talks to Beethoven* (1989)

This play is written by Kennedy and it is one of her debatable literary works. It portrays a lady sitting at home, paying attention to radio news contemplating on her husband's absence. She tries to busy herself with reading Ludwig van Beethoven's letters until the composer himself arrives. He appears in her husband's shape, to support and alleviate her bereavement, fear, and infirmity. Suzanne, (David's wife) is a major character in this play who is used as a link between the dead and living. A sudden disappearance of her husband turns her to talk with the dead as a part of consolation of her hard predicament. She reads from published diaries that "Beethoven did not come. After waiting a long time, we drove to his lodgings to bring him but he lay in bed sleeping soundly. Beside him stood a goblet with wine and a biscuit in it." (Kennedy 2001:140). Because of the difficult situation in which the characters are left, the atmosphere of the play shifts the audience to the surrealistic world. Their behaviours are somehow irrational and unnatural, "though we encounter Kennedy's characters in surrealistic dreamscapes, the voice of history is strong in almost all of her works." (Kolin 2007: 62). Kennedy's traumatized characters are incarcerated in the cruelties of white institutions and their own personal dilemmas.

In most of Kennedy's plays, the recurrent character is also the writer, Suzanne Alexander, who writes about and speaks to Beethoven in a reflection that combines time into presence. It is surrounded by radio broadcasts about Suzanne's husband, David, who is missing under inexplicable circumstances; "he has received threats and had disappeared to protect his wife from whom he is otherwise inseparable." (Bryant-Jackson & Overbeck 1992: 37). This play has been built on a dialogue between the writer and composer with reciprocal understanding regardless the remote distance. The surrealistic sense is embodied in how Kennedy has created a kind of communication between Beethoven, who died a long time ago, with the person who speaks in this play. Incidentally, Unnatural and irrational enquiry raised by Suzanne:

SUZANNE: Did I awaken you?

BEETHOVEN: I was dreaming of my mother and how every year on Saint Magdalena's day, her name and birth date, we would celebrate. The music stands would be brought out. And chairs would be placed everywhere and a canopy set up in the room where the portrait of my grandfather hung.

SUZANNE: Wait. I want to talk to you. Before David disappeared, he questioned me on passages I wrote about you in Vienna....

BEETHOVEN: Perhaps you might seek a retreat in the woods, Suzanne. It makes me happy to wander among herbs and trees (142).

This direct dialogue between the dead and living individual confirms that Suzanne is living in a depressing nightmare. Patti Hartigan (2000:113) asserts that Kennedy is one of those who are influenced by a surrealistic technique, and that "her plays often unfold on that sort of surreal landscape, where racial hatred can turn an innocent daydream into a vicious nightmare".

The use of inanimate objects in this play increases and complicates Suzanne's dilemma especially her listening to the radio to hear something about her husband's disappearance. On the radio, she ponders on "Has David Alexander been murdered? The outspoken professor at the University of Legon is still missing. As we have reported, Alexander worked with Fanon in Blida and was friends with the late Patrice Lumumba." (143). In fact, the troubled psyche can only be calm through hearing or reading good news about the cause of its sadness and depression. In this respect, Georgie Boucher argues that "Kennedy's fragmented characters are unfixed from traditional positions in relation to one another." (Boucher 2006: 95). Some playwrights dispense with showing real characters on the stage and shorten this by using the technique of inanimate objects. Although this

technique is not only used by Kennedy, it confirms the playwright's professionalism in employing everything to convey the intended purpose.

It seems that Kennedy is firmly adamant that the relationship between the living and the dead cannot be canceled because it is far from reality. In this play, Kennedy portrays the spiritual connection between Beethoven and Suzanne in order to recognize the real destiny of her husband. The dead and living converse about her husband, David:

SUZANNE: You must dress now for the concert.

BEETHOVEN: Please go to the theatre with me.

SUZANNE: I must watch the road for David.

BEETHOVEN: We'll stay together until David arrives. We'll watch the road and go to the theatre together (145).

Asking the dead to know the fate of the living, gives a tragic impression that the living do not pay any clear attention to the plight of others. To show the sourness of tragedy, Claudia Barnett (1996:145) asserts that "Kennedy's characters are frequently doomed by tragedies they cannot control". It is obviously expected that if a person is exposed to a problem greater than his capacity for patience, he will certainly resort to unnatural and unreasonable behaviour.

Under the pressure of bereavement, one cannot outline his thinking properly. There is no doubt that all thinking is paralyzed to the point where it is not possible to endure the anguish with accurate awareness. Psychological frustration is the result of an internal repression that cannot be easily perceived unless it has left an organic effect on people who are not alert in dealing with difficult situations seriously. Kennedy intends to portray her characters who "have bodies that exhibit the psychological effects of years of external racist abuse and internalized destructive psychology." (Boucher 2006: 98). Physically and mentally, Suzanne is fragmented that she cannot comprehend which of the two worlds is the one that may shelter her. The world of the dead reassures her as she attentively listens to Beethoven's words "I feel David will return by morning, perhaps on the road with the musicians, perhaps even in disguise." (145). It is necessary to grasp how much David's absence inflames her heart and mind to hear any word of contentment wherever her husband is. Kennedy's play is regarded as dynamic literary work that stimulates the audience opinion and consciousness. The audience, as Jenny Spencer (2012: 30) affirms that "understanding the self-conscious release of theatrical spectators to their own imaginations helps explain the dynamic at work in Kennedy's rarely performed play, *She Talks to Beethoven*".

In mirroring her hallucinating moment, Suzanne comprehends that "Monday, the 26th of March 1827 was a freezing day. There was no more breathing, no more heartbeat! The great composer's spirit fled from this world." (149). The irrationality that Kennedy has fashioned in this play, especially the dialogue between the living and the dead of a very distant period like Beethoven, confirms that she is concerned with a surrealistic procedure. Accordingly, Kennedy is viewed as one of the only skilful black authors who utilized the surrealistic style of drama (Bryant-Jackson & Overbeck 1992: 68). In this concern, Kennedy proves her aptitude in delving into the realm of the dead, which necessitates a great knowledge to transport the spectators to an illusionary and surrealistic world. Her plays frequently clarify a nature of surreal scenery, where racial detestation can change guiltless reverie into a ferocious nightmarish (Hartigan 2000:113). Obviously, the pain of bereavement widens the suffering of the individual who cannot find a way to overcome his personal anxiety.

Kennedy's characters are constantly destined by calamities beyond their control and comprehension. It is impossible to get rid of these calamities passing through submission, but by serious and strong determination away from confusion that may complicated normal situations. Since there was a great confusion in her mind, Kennedy has disclosed that "she has turned that confusion into complex drama." (Gray 2004: 688). Kennedy's psychological representation of her protagonists is "a mosaic of traditional (archetypal) female fears and fantasies and whose consciousness of self is both male and female." (Curb 1980: 181). Exposing the exhausted psyche needs precise exploration to appreciate the truth.

It is the fact that Kennedy's use of surrealism and expressionism help clarify the psychological deterioration of her feminine protagonists in the first place. Dreams and images are efficiently occasioned to depict such psychological conflict. Surrealism is implicitly outlined as a catalyst for expressing the inner conflict. One of Kennedy's favourite stylistic techniques is the use of repetition. Such a repetition often occurs as unconscious repetition: as present performance of what the conscious memory fails to recall. *She Talks to Beethoven* is one of Kennedy's *Alexander Plays* published in 1992. The other plays in this collection are *The Ohio State Murders*, *The Film Club*, and *Dramatic Circle*. The protagonist in these plays is Suzanne Alexander, whose character represents Kennedy herself. Suzanne is a fictional creation of Kennedy's perception. She is a very reputed black dramatist who holds the responsibility of recording with honesty and truth the violence and oppression practiced against the blacks in the course of history. Kennedy unmask her own traumatic experiences when she presents Suzanne's character (Kolin 2005: 116).

In her *People*, Kennedy reveals how Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) was a source of artistic and personal inspiration for her:

I bought a foot-high ivory statue of him at Pellenberg's on Broadway and put it on my desk for inspiration and read and reread Sullivan's book on the life of Beethoven-his spiritual development, his music, and his lukewarm Danube bath and his growing deafness- and I listened to his string quartets (Lee 2012: 243).

The play explores the story of Suzanne Alexander, who tries to compensate the difficult absence of her husband. Her main concern is to be assured of her husband's destiny. This problem is intelligibly shown through her association with Beethoven who shares much of her personal anxiety. Suzanne's aspiration to set wrong things right, appears to be completely destroyed by the pressing realities of life. In a well- fictionalized conversation, both Suzanne and Beethoven exchange their own grievances and concerns about their exceptional predicaments. Philip Kolin (2007: 122) maintains that "the two artists share secrets, lament maladies, and inscribe ideas in each other's works". The action here shows the close correlation between listening and seeing. Suzanne finds solace in listening to music, which shifts between African chordal instruments that Ghanaians play outside the house and Beethoven's own masterpiece. Her listening is intended to progressively lessen the agony of bereavements.

As the play moves, parts of Suzanne's condition, her bad health and separation, her devotion to writing, her emotion of being misinterpreted become very clear (Spenser 2012: 31). To verify a surrealistic tone, the play ends with a note of hope and reconciliation, Suzanne asks David whether he has sent Beethoven to her, and David's voice answers in the affirmative "I knew he would console you while I was absent." (155). Carol Allen (2005: 210) states that "this doubling over and blurring suggests that "I" is fluid, David thanking the artist for filing in, but also Beethoven pledging that he will return when David leaves again".

Beethoven is the means by whom Suzanne can relax her heart-rending separation from her husband. In her physical and psychological bereavement, Suzanne talks with Beethoven's spirit to purify the troubled part of her mind and psyche. Listening carefully and thoughtfully to Beethoven's musical art inflames her enthusiasm to recognize the eternal disappearance of her husband (Lee 2012: 210). In this regard, the world of dreams and illusions has governed Suzanne's confidence that she finds it as an actual relief and solace. It is noted that the pain of loss is so severe and it becomes impossible to gather scattered spirit. Therefore, it turns out to be very necessary for the possibility of overcoming the bereavements in the midst of the psychological labyrinth that imposed by intolerable circumstances.

1-3-Conclusion:

Not always the modern American playwrights have outlined a recommended solution for their literary works, but they left the exposed social problems unsettled to confirm the endless pain of the distressed individuals. Psychologically, Suzanne is lost between two dilemmas, either to trust her an illogical false impression or to believe the actual death of her husband. The play reflects the increasing division of Suzanne's consciousness since she is deserted without any support from her friends or relatives to tolerate her grief. There is unknown range of misery, but its severity tends to decrease with time. But, if grief worsens over time rather than improves or interferes with the ability to function in daily life, a grief counselor or other mental health provider should be consulted. A sense of control and direction in her life can be reestablished and back on the path to recovery, if healthy professional support has been prescribed. Like Suzanne, the problem of some women is that they cannot endure daily life without their husbands.

Kennedy utilizes a Surrealistic technique to visualize the unbearable human experience. By this technique, she makes a balance between rational visibility of life and the devotion of the unconscious and misconception. Accordingly, surrealist theatre is an unusual theatre. Those who are concerned with this type of technique believe that the theatre is an unavoidable need, due to its serious effect on the audience. Their purpose is to delineate uniqueness, moods, and disorder filled with freedom to stimulate surprise. The expression of a secluded life to free one from its nightmares, is the aim of most successful playwrights. In conclusion, Kennedy has portrayed her agonized protagonist in a way that she succeeds in creating a sense of suspense to produce a bright representation of bereavements.

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تصوير الفواجع: تحليل سريلي للأموات الإحياء في مسرحية أدريان كنيدي
(تحدث مع بيتهوفن)

المستخلص:

تكشف هذه الدراسة عن العلاقة الخفية بين الأشخاص الأحياء والأموات. وعلى الرغم من انفصال الموتى عن عالم الأحياء، إلا أنهم كانوا مرتبطين بعقلهم الباطن وتبقى ذكراهم خالدة لدى الأفراد الأحياء. أن الحزن الشخصي هو الكارثة التي تنشأ كنتيجة معبرة لمنع الشخص من الاختيار المناسب للأشياء المحيطة به. تحاول أدريان كنيدي، في مسرحيتها "تحدث مع بيتهوفن" إلى تقصي الدوافع السرية التي تهيمن على تفكير الفرد وسلوكه وتتحكم فيه ليعيش خلالها حالة ذهنية حرجة.