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When Prison Becomes Safer than Freedom: Mutual Entrapment in Prison Graduates

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Abstract

This study examines how Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's play Prison Graduates dramatizes the predicament of the postcolonial Ghanaian state, in which freedom outside the prison proves more threatening than confinement within it. The purpose of the research was to move beyond existing satirical readings of the play and to interpret its central motif of "Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome" as a metaphor for national dependency. Adopting a qualitative design, the study employed close textual analysis of selected scenes, speeches, and stage directions, which were interpreted through the lens of postcolonial theory, drawing on the concepts of neocolonialism and the psychology of dependency. The analysis revealed that the play stages a condition of mutual entrapment, in which failed state institutions (the cash-and-carry hospital, the prosperity-gospel pulpit, and the extortionate embassy) and a citizenry shaped by them together make the prison cell the most rational refuge available. It further found that the youthful urge to migrate functions as another symptom of this entrapment rather than an escape from it. The study concluded that the play presents sustainable development as contingent on transforming both the institutions and the dependent consciousness they cultivate.

1. Introduction

There is a moment near the opening of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *Prison Graduates* when the gates of the cell swing open and the four inmates step out into what should be the wide horizon of freedom. Instead, they find that the air outside is heavier than the air inside. The Chaplain greets them. The prison officers wave them off. And yet they cannot leave the threshold. Gomido captures the paradox in a line that sits at the heart of this paper's argument: "I agree freedom is never more sharply focused than when it is denied to you. But it could equally be dangerous when thrown at you like a basketball" (Mawugbe, 2015, p. 11). Chaka puts it more bitingly still: "the only time you experience the beauty of democracy is when you step out of prison after a long sentence" (p. 10). Freedom, in *Prison Graduates*, is not a horizon. It is a hazard.

Mawugbe stages this hesitation as comedy, but the joke turns quickly. The men have contracted what the play names Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome, or A.P.T.S., a condition the play presents simultaneously as a clinical fiction, a national diagnosis, and, by the final curtain, a verdict the state itself pronounces over its own citizens. This paper takes the play's

title at its word. Prison, in Mawugbe's stage Ghana, has indeed become safer than freedom. The cell offers free food, free shelter, free medical care, and structured days. Outside the cell, the citizen meets cash-and-carry hospitals that detain him for unpaid bills, embassies that extort him for visas he is then denied, and prosperity-gospel churches that demand his tithe even as his work goes unpaid. Under such conditions, the cell is not a failure of freedom. It is the only rational alternative the state has left.

This paper argues, accordingly, that *Prison Graduates* is best read not as satire alone but as a diagnosis of mutual entrapment. The men who cannot leave the cell are not weak; they are accurate. But neither are they wholly innocent. Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome is the play's clinical name for a condition co-produced by neocolonial institutional failure and the citizen consciousness that those institutions have shaped. The study therefore pursues three objectives: to reinterpret the play's governing metaphor as a representation of national dependency rather than individual pathology; to show how its three principal institutions — the hospital, the pulpit, and the embassy — operate as a single neocolonial system; and to demonstrate that the youthful urge to migrate is a further symptom of this entrapment rather than an escape from it. The significance of the study lies in extending the discussion of the play beyond satirical classification toward the question of sustainable development, and in offering a reading that accounts for the play's troubling ending, in which three of the four protagonists return to prison of their own accord. The discussion that follows first reviews the available scholarship, then sets out the methodology, before presenting the analysis and its implications.

2. Literature Review

Despite winning the BBC World Service and British Council International Radio Playwriting Competition in 2009 and being included in Banham et al.'s edited volume *African Theatre 11: Festivals* (Mawugbe, 2012), *Prison Graduates* has received remarkably little sustained scholarly attention. Its publication as a standalone text by Afram Publications in 2015 has not yet generated a substantial critical literature. To date, the only published, peer-reviewed article-length engagement with the play that we have been able to locate is Essuman, Ben-Daniels, and Ohene-Adu (2021), whose reading provides the principal interlocutor for the present study.[1]

Essuman et al. (2021) approach *Prison Graduates* through the tenets of postcolonial theory, arguing that the play exemplifies the disillusionment characteristic of post-independence African drama. Their central concern is satirical classification: they identify Mawugbe's mode as predominantly Juvenalian, marked by moral indignation rather than gentle Horatian amusement, and they trace this register through the play's principal satirical targets, including the figure of the Chaplain, the prosperity-gospel pulpit, the cash-and-carry medical system, and the visa regime. Their concluding claim is that Mawugbe deploys satire to construct an African world that looks beyond foreign aid in order to reclaim African dignity and identity. The political work of the play, on their reading, falls on the citizenry: it is the audience that must change.

The present study is indebted to Essuman et al.'s identification of the play's satirical targets and shares their broad postcolonial orientation. It departs from their reading, however, in three specific respects. First, where Essuman et al. take the satirical device as the unit of analysis, this paper takes the institutional arrangement as the unit of analysis: the hospital, the pulpit, and the embassy are read not as satirical objects but as functioning components of a single neocolonial system. Second, where Essuman et al. read the play forward from its satirical devices to its political themes, this paper reads the play backward from its ending, treating the voluntary return of three protagonists to the prison as evidentiary rather than as a problem to be explained away. Finally, where Essuman et al. conclude that the play urges citizens to reclaim their dignity, this paper concludes that the play diagnoses a mutual entrapment in which

the failed institutions of the state and the consciousness of the citizens together make the cell the most humane facility available.

Beyond this peer-reviewed engagement, the play can be situated within a longer tradition of postcolonial Ghanaian and African drama. The Ghanaian theatre was conceived, almost from the start, as a project of nation-building: Kwame Nkrumah's National Theatre Movement mobilised drama as a vehicle for self-rule, and the early generation of playwrights — Efua Sutherland, Joe de Graft, and Ama Ata Aidoo — wrote in the optimistic afterglow of independence, drawing on oral traditions to imagine a new African self. As Essuman, Ben-Daniels, and Ohene-Adu (2021) observe, however, the post-independence African play became increasingly characterised by disillusionment with the African reality, with playwrights deploying satire to register their frustration with corruption and other neocolonial pathologies. Mawugbe writes from inside that fraying optimism. Yet the existing scholarship, focused on the play's satirical devices, has not examined how those devices cohere into a single representation of institutional and psychological entrapment, nor how that entrapment bears on the prospects for sustainable development. It is this gap — between reading the play as satire and reading it as a diagnosis of mutual entrapment — that the present study addresses.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design and is interpretive in orientation, since its aim is to understand and explain meaning in a literary text rather than to measure or quantify. The primary data for the study is the published text of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *Prison Graduates* (2015), issued by Afram Publications. The play was purposively selected for three reasons: it is one of the few of Mawugbe's plays available in a published edition; it has attracted very little critical attention relative to its significance; and its central concern with imprisonment, freedom, and the postcolonial state makes it especially suited to the questions the study raises.

The method of analysis is close textual analysis. Rather than surveying the play uniformly, the study purposively identifies the scenes, speeches, and stage directions in which the play's institutions are most clearly dramatised — the release at the prison gate, the hospital sequence, the prosperity-gospel sermon, the visa interview, the reclaiming of the characters' names, and the final return to the cell. Each selected passage is read closely and treated not as an isolated moment of satire but as evidence of the workings of a single system. Brief, attributed quotations from the play are used to ground each interpretive claim, while the analysis itself carries the explanatory weight. Where the play refers to real institutional conditions, secondary sources are used to corroborate the dramatic representation — as with Ibrahim and O'Keefe's (2014) account of Ghana's cash-and-carry health system. Where the play's concerns resonate with documented developments it does not itself stage, such sources are offered as contextual background rather than direct evidence — as with Firsing's (2024) data on medical migration and brain drain.

The analysis is framed by postcolonial theory, and specifically by two concepts. The first is Kwame Nkrumah's (1965) concept of neocolonialism, which describes the persistence of foreign economic and institutional control after the formal end of colonial rule; this concept is used to read the hospital, the pulpit, and the embassy as components of a continuing system of dependency. The second is Frantz Fanon's (1963) account of the psychology of colonisation, in which the colonised subject internalises the structures of domination even after the coloniser has departed; this concept is used to explain why the play's characters experience freedom as a threat and confinement as a refuge. Taken together, the two concepts allow the study to read Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome simultaneously as an institutional condition and a psychological one, and so to interpret the play as a diagnosis of mutual entrapment.

4. Results and Discussion

A word on the play's dramaturgy is necessary before the findings are presented, because it governs how its institutions are read here. After their release, the four ex-convicts pass the time by performing improvised sketches in which they take turns playing the nurses, the consular officer, the prosperity preacher, and the politician they expect to meet outside. The hospital, the embassy, the pulpit, and the political rally are therefore not events that befall the characters but scenes the characters stage — satirical role-plays through which the play exposes each institution. Guided by this dramaturgy and by the framework set out above, this section presents the findings in a logical sequence, beginning with the play's central diagnosis before turning to the three institutions the sketches indict, the play's form, and its closing scene.

4.1 Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome as National Diagnosis

The play's central conceit is that the four inmates, having served their sentences, have been "graduated", and yet they cannot leave. Mawugbe presents A.P.T.S. as a condition characterised by a fear of the unstructured outside, a clinging to institutional identity, and a paralysing inability to imagine alternative futures.

The metaphor is structural rather than incidental. To suffer from A.P.T.S. is to have internalised one's confinement so thoroughly that liberation registers as loss. Read against the postcolonial Ghanaian context, the implications are stark. If colonialism is understood as the long external incarceration of African political and economic life, then the moment of independence ought to have been the moment of release. Yet, for many citizens — and especially for the youth Mawugbe places at the centre of his stage — independence has not produced the conditions of meaningful freedom. The structures of dependency, of patronage, of imported solutions to local problems, all remain. The gates are open; the citizens cannot walk through.

Crucially, the play itself articulates this entrapment as mutual rather than one-sided. In a notable passage during the men's mock political rally, Chaka observes that as a nation "we lock up such brains behind all sorts of artificial prison bars," and laments the "internal brain drain we are carrying out very subtly on ourselves" through the prison systems (Mawugbe, 2015, p. 48). The speech names both sides at once. The artificial bars belong to the institutional apparatus of the state; the internal brain drain belongs to the citizenry that uses, sustains, and accepts those institutions. A.P.T.S., as Mawugbe diagnoses it through Chaka, is the disease produced by the co-operation of failed institutions and the consciousness those institutions have shaped.

The diagnosis is not Mawugbe's alone. It is pronounced over the men, near the end of the play, by the state itself. When the men return to the prison gate seeking re-admission, the Prison Officer's Voice declares them "all suffering from an acute form of Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome" (Mawugbe, 2015, p. 86). The state has named the disease. That naming is the play's most damning irony, since the state is precisely the institution that has helped produce the disease in the first place.

The play makes the diagnosis most concretely through the question of names. The four men begin as serial numbers (xyz24, www.96, PT 007, and KW.66), and only midway through the First Leg do they reach for the human names of Abutu, Gomido, Chaka, and Basabasa. Chaka frames the substitution explicitly: "That is definitely better than referring to each other by the numbers given to us from our prison past" (p. 14). Abutu insists on the political stakes of the moment: "We need to be original. We need something of our own. To reflect our new status… Our sovereignty… We need to create for ourselves a new identity" (p. 13). The on-stage moment of reclamation is therefore a miniature of the larger postcolonial task the play demands of its audience. That the men accomplish the lesser act of naming themselves but cannot accomplish the greater act of walking through the open gate is the play's central irony.

4.2 The Cash-and-Carry Medical System

The first prison the play anatomises is the healthcare system. Ghana's so-called "cash and carry" model — a pay-before-treatment arrangement adopted in the mid-1980s — required patients to settle bills out of pocket before receiving care, with those who could not pay either

denied treatment or detained at the facility (Ibrahim & O'Keefe, 2014). Although the National Health Insurance Scheme was introduced in 2003 to replace this model, the cash-and-carry imaginary has remained a powerful satirical target in Ghanaian writing, in part because the system shaped the healthcare expectations of a whole generation.

Mawugbe stages this system as parody. To prove Abutu's grim thesis that in their society death has become more profitable than life, the four men act out an elaborate sketch in which Gomido volunteers to play a desperately ill patient, performing the role under the name Gomey, while the others take the parts of an ambulance driver, nurses, and a hospital orderly (Mawugbe, 2015, p. 58). Within the enactment, the nurse demands a fifty-dollar deposit before the doctor will even guess at the necessary lab tests; the deposit is then revealed to cover only the guesswork, with further fees due for the tests themselves. "Cash and carry," the nurse confirms, in a whisper that doubles as a diagnosis (p. 71). The patient cannot pay. He is moved from Ward "B" to Ward "D", "D for Death" (p. 72), and is left to die on a wooden bench that the Orderly calls a hospital bed (pp. 72–73). The Orderly's casual cruelties accumulate: newly born babies sleep on the cold terrazzo floor, six to a cot; the doctor has joined a picket line for better pay; mothers are too grateful to complain (p. 74). Because the death is performed rather than real, its force is satirical: the men dramatise precisely how the cash-and-carry hospital disposes of the poor, staging it as a cell with worse rations.

The parody refuses to let the institution carry the blame alone. Within the same sketch, the institutional refusal to treat without payment is mirrored, with disturbing exactness, by a refusal from within the brotherhood: when Basa pleads for taxi fare to rush the stricken man to hospital, Chaka refuses outright, demanding "What has he ever done for me?" (Mawugbe, 2015, p. 60). The institution refuses without payment; the brother refuses without prior debt. Both refusals operate by the same monetised logic. The scene's implication is that the state has not merely failed its citizens; it has produced citizens who reproduce its cruelty laterally, refusing one another on the same terms by which the system has long refused them. The performed death therefore indicts twice over: it shows the poor killed once by cash-and-carry and once by the monetised conscience the system has bred in its victims.

What the play exposes, then, is the way the cash-and-carry logic produces a particular kind of citizen, and how that citizen, in turn, sustains the logic. To be a Ghanaian patient under cash-and-carry is to learn that one's body is a debt instrument, that ill health is a financial event before it is a medical one, and that the state does not stand behind the citizen when he is most vulnerable. This is precisely the lesson that produces A.P.T.S., and produces, in the play's final Leg, the men's calculation that the prison's free meals and free medical attention are simply better than what the state outside the walls offers. "In Prison," Gomido says, "we shall become assets of the State and receive free medical attention" (p. 82). Basa adds: "Cash and carry go be history" (p. 82). The line is comic. It is also exact. Under cash-and-carry, the cell does abolish the bill.

4.3 Religious Exploitation and the Chaplain

The second prison is the church. Mawugbe's most pointed satirical energy in the early scenes is directed at the figure of the Chaplain, the prison's official spiritual gatekeeper. Essuman, Ben-Daniels, and Ohene-Adu (2021) read the play's treatment of religion as Juvenalian — harsh, indignant, and morally scornful. The play's text bears this out repeatedly. Gomido calls the Chaplain a "double-tongued charlatan" (Mawugbe, 2015, p. 5), a "wolf in sheep's clothing" (p. 6), and accuses him of being "God's tap-turner" who ensures water flows only to his mother-in-law's kitchen (p. 6).

The ferocity has a specific cause. Gomido reveals, in a scene of almost confessional grief, that the Chaplain who is now blessing his release was the Chaplain at Anomabo Prison where he served part of his sentence — a Chaplain who, during a moving sermon, persuaded Gomido to confess an undetected robbery, only for the confession to result in additional years of imprisonment. "I never knew," Gomido tells his fellow inmates through sobs, "that every Prison Chappie worked for God above and the system below" (p. 9). This is the play's clearest

statement of the Chaplain's structural role. He is not a counter to the state. He is its informant. The pulpit and the prison gate operate as one institution.

That insight scales beyond the prison Chaplain. Later in the play, Gomido performs an extended parody of a prosperity-gospel preacher, "Gomey", at the "Synagogue of Jesus Christ of the people, by the people and for the people" (p. 20). Gomey teaches the congregation that prosperity flows only through the Bishop (p. 22), and that workers should game the cash-and-carry healthcare system to attend his ten-day crusade: "If your work is going to bother you, just report sick at the hospital. Ask the Doctor to give you five days sick-off" (p. 22). The two prisons are explicitly linked here. The prosperity gospel does not merely parallel cash-and-carry; it instructs its followers to exploit cash-and-carry to fund the church. The Chaplain's bargain is therefore not the play's villain so much as its diagnostic instrument. A.P.T.S. has a theological dimension: the cell is not only material but also doctrinal.

4.4 The Visa, the Dollar, and the Urge for Greener Pastures

The third prison is the one that locks its inmates from the inside. It is the conviction, widely shared among contemporary Ghanaian youth, that the only honourable future lies abroad. Mawugbe stages this conviction through a sustained mock interview scene in which Gomido plays a female European consular officer interrogating Abutu (Mawugbe, 2015, pp. 26–36). The interview is a humiliation. The officer demands the names and dates of birth of cousins, the monthly salary of fathers, the precise place of customary marriages, and finally rejects the visa on the unfalsifiable ground that the applicant's eyes and the shape of his nose suggest he will not return (p. 33). Abutu erupts: "They are all Diplomatic robbers. You are all a bunch of Diplomatic extortionists" (p. 34).

The play then does what no satirical reading can quite contain. It calculates. With Basa, Chaka, and Gomido performing the arithmetic, the men work out that 500 applicants per day, each paying ₵990,000 in non-refundable visa fees, across five working days, four weeks, and twelve months, yields ₵188.8 billion (pp. 35–36). That sum, Gomido observes, would pay for over 500 boreholes to provide potable water for rural communities in 300 villages, and re-gravel several kilometres of feeder road (p. 36); Basabasa adds that it could build proper classroom blocks for 250 rural communities and save teachers from holding classes under trees (p. 36). The visa fee, the play insists, is not a fee. It is "the unsolicited contribution by our poor folks from this God-forsaken side of the Atlantic Ocean, to the economy of former colonial masters" (p. 36). The institution that processes the dream of leaving is itself an extraction mechanism, one the play frames explicitly as a transfer of resources to the economy of the former colonial masters. The visa sketch concerns would-be migrants in general rather than any single profession; yet the dynamic it dramatises has since assumed a concrete sectoral form. By way of contextual resonance rather than direct evidence, it is worth noting that more Ghanaian-trained nurses are now reported to work in the United Kingdom than in Ghana, the number joining the National Health Service having risen sharply between 2019 and 2022 (Firsing, 2024). The play does not depict this nursing exodus, but it anticipates the logic that drives it.

Yet here too the play complicates the institutional reading. In an extended scene, Gomido fantasises, with full agency and considerable enthusiasm, about establishing himself as a prosperity-gospel Bishop dealing in cocaine, describing the crop as going through the same processes of harvesting, refining, packaging, shipping, and marketing as sugarcane (Mawugbe, 2015, p. 24). Nobody coerces him into the fantasy. The scene is uncomfortable because it shows what neocolonial conditions cultivate in even sympathetic characters: ambitions that mirror, rather than oppose, the institutions that have failed them. A.P.T.S. is therefore not only the inmate's longing for the cell; it is also the citizen's internalisation of the system's extractive logic, to the point where the imagined transgression becomes a small-scale mimicry of the same machinery the visa scene exposes.

What Mawugbe does with the migration theme is what gives the play its bite. He refuses to romanticise the migrant ambition, and he refuses to scold it. He locates the urge to emigrate

inside the syndrome. To want to leave Ghana is not, in this play, a sign of agency; it is another symptom of A.P.T.S. — the same fear of the open street, only redirected outward. Before the men even stage the embassy sketch, Abutu has already resolved that he will not stay in the country "for one more day" and is bound for Europe (p. 25); the enacted interview then dramatises what that longing runs into. The three prisons are named in a single breath: the clinic, the pulpit, and the embassy collapse into one intolerable home, and the dream of abroad is only the cell's mirror image.

4.5 Staccato Form and the Grammar of the Cell

The findings so far have concerned content; the play's form carries the same argument. Mawugbe writes in a hybrid register: the cadenced, communal wit of West African oral performance, braided with the staccato repetitions and existential stillness of theatrical absurdism. The four-man cast, the bare set, the meta-theatrical role-playing, and the pervasive sense of waiting recall the conventions of absurdist drama, yet the suffering Mawugbe stages is political rather than metaphysical. Where absurdist theatre asks why human beings suffer at all, Mawugbe asks who built the system that makes these particular citizens suffer here and now — since their suffering can be traced to a specific health policy, a specific tithe-economy, and a specific visa regime.

The play is profoundly staccato, and the staccato is not a stylistic flourish but a formal performance of imprisonment. Prison life is built from clipped, disconnected intervals, and Mawugbe's short exchanges, abrupt pauses, and the recurring *Silence* stage direction enact the rhythm of the cell before any character speaks of confinement. The play opens with a Lone Voice intoning a corrupted Psalm 23: "The Lord is our shepherd, We shall not want. He maketh us to lie down on cold dungeon floors… He locketh us behind the steel bars" (Mawugbe, 2015, p. 2). The interruption of sacred cadence by prison vocabulary is the staccato made theological. The same rhythm structures the citizen's experience of the three institutions: a citizen falls ill, stop, can he pay?, prays, stop, where is the tithe?, plans a future, stop, where is the visa?

Against this staccato, Mawugbe sets the legato of African oral performance. The men corrupt the Lord's Prayer in Pidgin (p. 7); they turn institutional acronyms into local wit, so that PRISON becomes "Palace Reserved for Important Sons of the Nation" (p. 81); and they speak through proverbs, as when one declares that "the eagle that lays its eggs where no human eye can see has spoken" (p. 78). These oral devices do political work, demonstrating that the cure for A.P.T.S. cannot be imported but must be locally voiced. The reclaiming of the characters' broken serial numbers as human names is, in this sense, an attempt to move a whole people from staccato back to legato.

4.6 The Cell as Rational Choice: The Play's Indictment

The reading offered here is confirmed by the play's ending, which refuses to behave like satire. In the closing pages of the Fourth Leg, after a storm intensifies and Abutu refuses to follow them, Chaka, Gomido, and Basabasa return to the prison gate and seek re-admission — not under coercion, but by formal vote. "We are in a democracy. Let us put it to vote," Chaka announces (Mawugbe, 2015, p. 82). Gomido and Basa vote to return; Abutu votes against; Chaka, the leader who called the vote, abstains. That the leader calls the vote and then refuses to commit himself is a telling detail: the journey back to the cell is not led so much as ratified.

At the gate, Gomido — the same Gomido who has spent the play denouncing the Chaplain — offers a sentence that reverses the play's premise: "That's a lie and you know it. Rather, it was the freedom that couldn't handle us" (p. 86). The line is the play's central indictment of the state, and the present reading can incorporate it directly. Outside the cell, as the play's sketches dramatise, the cash-and-carry hospital lets the poor die on a bench, the visa regime extorts and humiliates the applicant, and the prison Chaplain once doubled as the informant who lengthened Gomido's sentence. Inside the cell, the men will become assets of the State and receive free medical attention, free shelter, and freedom from rent (p. 82). The cell is the only institution in the play that does not extract from the citizen: it feeds him, shelters him, and

treats him, and is therefore, by the brutal arithmetic of the surrounding institutions, the most humane facility the state operates.

The state, for its part, knows what is happening, and its reception of the returning men is the play's most damning image. The Voice diagnoses A.P.T.S. (p. 86), accepts the men's return, and proceeds to humiliate them: the new Chief Prison Officer hands them kneepads, places them in solitary confinement, and informs them that they have "forfeited" the right to walk upright "by applying for readmission into the palace" (Mawugbe, 2015, p. 87). When the men plead to be allowed to walk in on their own feet, the Voice refuses: "Too late" (p. 87). The image is devastating in two directions: it is the state turning the men back into prisoners, and it is the state confirming that crawling is the price of the only welfare it provides. The state's welfare and the citizen's dignity have been formally severed by the institution itself.

Abutu's alternative is no consolation. He stays outside not to embrace freedom but to start a coffin-and-casket business profiting from AIDS deaths (p. 57). Mawugbe thus leaves the audience with a closing tableau in which neither path resembles dignity: three of the men crawl back into the cell on kneepads, while Abutu remains outside only to profit from death by selling coffins. This is what the title means. Prison has become safer than freedom because the state has criminalised survival outside the walls and because the citizens have learned to ratify that arrangement. A.P.T.S. is neither only the citizens' pathology nor only the state's production; it is both. The cell is rational because the alternatives have been engineered — by neocolonial institutional arrangement and by the dependent consciousness it cultivates — to be worse.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to reinterpret Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *Prison Graduates* beyond its established reading as satire, and to show that its governing metaphor — Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome — names a condition that exceeds the four men on stage. The analysis has demonstrated that the play stages the postcolonial Ghanaian situation as one of mutual entrapment, in which failing hospitals, exploitative churches, and the lure of the embassy queue together habituate citizens into recognising the cell as the most humane institution available to them, while those citizens, in turn, absorb the system's monetised relations into their dealings with one another.

Read through Nkrumah's (1965) concept of neocolonialism and Fanon's (1963) account of the psychology of dependency, the play's three principal targets — cash-and-carry healthcare, religious exploitation, and the urge to emigrate — emerge as three faces of one continuing system, while the play's staccato form enacts the very imprisonment its content describes. The blame, however, does not fall on the state alone: Chaka's refusal to help the dying Gomido, Gomido's own cocaine fantasy, and the cynical politics of the rally scene all show that citizens have internalised and reproduce the system's logic. The play's most-quoted line — that "it was the freedom that couldn't handle us" — is therefore not a confession of weakness but a verdict on a system that engineered the conditions of so-called freedom, and the deepest irony is that the state itself, in the closing pages, names the very disease it has helped to produce.

The significance of these findings is, finally, interpretive rather than prescriptive, though it bears on how the play invites its audience to think about development. A play diagnoses; it does not legislate, and literary criticism can clarify the terms of a problem without presuming to supply its policy. What *Prison Graduates* contributes, read in this way, is a particular account of why the cell comes to seem rational: not because of institutional failure alone, nor because of a dependent consciousness alone, but because the two produce one another. The force of that account is to suggest that any response adequate to the condition the play dramatises would have to address both at once — the institutions that make the cell rational and the habituated consciousness that learns to ratify it — since to repair either while neglecting the other would leave the syndrome intact. Whether such a double transformation is achievable is a question the play poses rather than answers. The four protagonists never quite cross the

threshold; Mawugbe leaves his audience with the open question of whether the institutions that built that threshold, and the citizens who learned to live within it, can be remade in time for the next generation to walk across it.

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[1] The play has, however, circulated more widely than this single article suggests: it appears in Banham et al.'s African Theatre 11: Festivals (Mawugbe, 2012) and has been staged and reviewed in the Ghanaian press, and it may also have been treated in conference papers, theses, or other grey literature not indexed in the major international databases. The narrower claim advanced here is that sustained, peer-reviewed critical scholarship on the play remains scarce.

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