

methuen | drama

student editions



INUA ELLAMS
THREE SISTERS

AFTER CHEKHOV
EDITED BY OLADIPO AGBOLUAJE

Three Sisters: After Chekhov

Inua Ellams was born in Nigeria and is an internationally touring poet, playwright, performer, graphic artist and designer. He is an ambassador for the Ministry of Stories and has published four books of poetry. His plays and stage adaptations include *The 14th Tale* (Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Fringe First winner), *Barber Shop Chronicles* (National Theatre) and *Three Sisters* (National Theatre). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Oladipo ‘Dipo’ Agboluaje is a British-Nigerian playwright and academic, born in London and educated in Britain and Nigeria. He studied Theatre Arts at the University of Benin, Nigeria, and later wrote a doctoral thesis at the Open University, UK, on West and South African drama. He won the Alfred Fagon prize for playwriting for his play *Iya-Ile* and is a Fellow of the Royal Literary Fund. He has written the commentary and notes to the Methuen Drama Student Edition of Inua Ellams’s *Barber Shop Chronicles* (2021) and Kwame Kwei-Armah’s *Beneatha’s Place* (2025).

Three Sisters: After Chekhov

Inua Ellams

With commentary and notes by

OLADIPO AGBOLUAJE

Series Editors: Jenny Stevens, Matthew Nichols,
Sara Freeman and Chris Megson

methuen | drama

LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

METHUEN DRAMA

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 1359 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland, 29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland
BLOOMSBURY, METHUEN DRAMA and the Methuen Drama logo are trademarks of
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain by Oberon Books 2019

Revised edition published by Methuen Drama 2021

Reprinted 2022, 2023, 2025

This student edition first published in 2026

Copyright © Inua Ellams, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2025, 2026

Commentary and notes copyright © Oladipo Agboluaje, 2026

Inua Ellams has asserted his right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Cover image: Inua Ellams

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be: i) reproduced or transmitted in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by means of any information storage or retrieval system without prior permission in writing from the publishers; or ii) used or reproduced in any way for the training, development or operation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI technologies. The rights holders expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception as per Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive (EU) 2019/790.

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

No rights in incidental music or songs contained in the work are hereby granted and performance rights for any performance/presentation whatsoever must be obtained from the respective copyright owners.

All rights whatsoever in this play are strictly reserved and application for performance etc. should be made before commencement of rehearsal to Casarotto Ramsay & Associates, info@casarotto.co.uk, 3rd Floor, 7 Savoy Court, Strand, London WC2R 0EX. No performance may be given unless a licence has been obtained, and no alterations may be made in the title or the text of the play without the author's prior written consent.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: PB: 978-1-3504-7318-8
ePDF: 978-1-3504-7319-5
eBook: 978-1-3504-7320-1

Series: Student Editions

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

Contents

Introduction 1

Timeline 1

Inua Ellams 3

Social and Political Context 5

The Berlin Conference (1884–1885) 5

Indirect Rule/Administration 5

The Formation of Nigeria 7

The Nigeria Civil War/Biafra War 8

Ethnicity 9

Anton Chekhov 10

Adaptations 12

Post-colonialism/Post-colonial theatre/Neo-colonialism 14

Commentary 16

Structure/Time 17

Fate and Duty 17

Tradition vs Modernity 18

Symbolism 18

Main Characters 19

Critical Reception 22

Texts Cited 24

Selected texts on the Biafran War 24

THREE SISTERS: AFTER CHEKHOV

Notes on the play-text 139

Introduction

Timeline

- 1860** **29 January.** Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born in Taganrog, Russia.
- 1884–85** The West African Conference of Berlin, aka the Berlin Conference, takes place from 15 November 1884 to 26 February 1885.
- 1901** *Three Sisters* premieres at the Moscow Art Theatre, directed by Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko.
- 1904** **15 July.** Chekhov dies from tuberculosis.
- 1906** The Colony of Lagos is merged with the Southern Protectorate of Nigeria.
- 1914** **1 January.** Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates to form Nigeria.
- 1962** An internal battle within the Action Group, the party in control of the Western Region, leads to the national government ordering a state of emergency in the Western Region and a suspension of the regional government. The state of emergency lasts for six months. A new coalition government takes over.
- 1962–63** The 1962 census, Nigeria's first as an independent nation, is rejected by the regional governments due to inflated figures. Another census is conducted in 1963, but the charges of inflated figures persisted. The crises that enveloped both censuses were because resource and revenue allocation were based on population numbers within each region. The northern region maintained its position as the most heavily populated region and thus maintained its political dominance over the country.

2 Three Sisters: After Chekhov

1963 **1 October.** Nigeria becomes a republic.

The Mid-West Region is created out of the Western Region.

1964–65 Violence ensues after an alliance of parties dominated by the Northern Peoples Congress wins the majority of seats in parliament. Opposition parties claim the election was fraudulent and boycott the elections. Elections in some regions do not take place until the following year.

1966 **15 January.** Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu leads Nigeria's first military coup. The majority of the coup plotters are of Igbo ethnicity, from the Eastern region. Northern officers and politicians are the main casualties. The coup is suppressed. Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi, also of Igbo ethnicity, becomes military head of state.

Col. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu is appointed Governor of the Eastern Region.

29 July. A counter-coup by Northern military officers leads to the assassination of Aguiyi-Ironsi and pogroms in the North against Igbo civilians and soldiers, forcing many to flee from the North back to Eastern Nigeria. Lt Col. Yakubu Gowon, a Northerner from a minority ethnic group becomes military head of state.

1967 **4–5 January.** Growing tensions between the Eastern Region and Nigeria lead to a meeting on neutral ground in Aburi, Ghana, to resolve the issues. The agreement reached is known as the Aburi Accord. Differences in the interpretation of the Accord lead to a deterioration in relations between the Federal Government and the Eastern Region.

27 May. Gowon announces the creation of twelve states, breaking up the Eastern Region.

30 May. Ojukwu declares the Republic of Biafra and secedes from Nigeria.

7 July. The Nigerian government declares war on Biafra.

7 October. The Asaba massacre by the Federal Government forces.

Wole Soyinka is detained by the Nigerian government after returning from a trip from Biafra to see Ojukwu. He is accused of conspiring with the Biafran army and spends twenty-two months in solitary confinement.

1970 **January.** Fall of Biafra, Ojukwu flees to the Ivory Coast, now Côte D'Ivoire.

The first version of Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* is performed at the Playwrights' Workshop Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre in Connecticut, USA.

1972 Wole Soyinka's account of his detention, *The Man Died*, is published.

1984 Inua Ellams is born on 23 October.

2006 *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is published.

2013 The movie adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun* is released. The movie stars Chiwetel Ejiofor, Thandie Newton, John Boyega and Genevieve Nnaji. The late playwright and novelist Biyi Bandele wrote the screenplay and directed the movie.

2019 **10 December** Ellams's adaptation of *Three Sisters* opens at the Lyttelton, National Theatre.

2024 **29 February-24 March** The Canadian premiere of *Three Sisters* runs at Soulpepper Theatre in Toronto in a co-production with Obsidian Theatre Company, directed by Mumbi Tindyebeba Otu.

Inua Ellams

Inua Ellams was born to a Muslim father and a Christian mother in the northern region that has dominated Nigerian politics since the country gained independence from Britain on 1 October 1960. Thus,

4 Three Sisters: After Chekhov

Ellams holds a unique position in writing a play about the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafra War. Initially, Ellams knew little about the conflict. His father mentioned in passing that an uncle had fought in the war on the side of the Nigerian federation. The subject was not taught in schools, and so only a few of his contemporaries possessed a basic knowledge of this significant event.¹ Reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Biafra-set novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) inspired Ellams to research the civil war. The shame of his ignorance combined with belonging to the politically dominant Northern region gave Ellams a sense of responsibility to bring this seminal but contentious moment in Nigeria's history to a wider public.²

Ellams did not initially set out to adapt *Three Sisters* to the Biafra War setting. He was originally commissioned by Metta Theatre³ to write a Chekhov adaptation but turned it down as none of the existing adaptations appealed to him. To kindle his enthusiasm, the artistic director Poppy Burton-Morgan read out to him the titles of all of Chekhov's plays. Ellams chose *Three Sisters* because he is a brother to three sisters: using them as inspiration would be the way into his version. The play ended up being co-produced by his regular collaborators Fuel and the National Theatre where his previous plays *Black T Shirt Collection* (2012) and *Barber Shop Chronicles* (2019) were staged. These plays were performed in the Dorfman (formerly the Cottesloe), the smallest of the National Theatre's three venues. *Three Sisters* was performed in the much larger Lyttelton Theatre.

Throughout Ellams's version of *Three Sisters*, he refers to the European influence in the making of the modern African nation-state and how it set the tone for the conflicts that continue to unfold on the continent. These nations were created without the consent or input of Africans. There would be uprisings such as in Algeria and Kenya, and negotiations and constitutional changes for independence as in the case of Nigeria, but these negotiations were based on the borders formed by the colonial powers. Many of the traditions that Africans assume to be indigenous to them were created and/or influenced by Europeans during this period to establish an ethnic identity, especially in areas where Africans did not subscribe to such groupings. The purpose was to make governing those areas effective.

To make sense of Ellams's adaptation of Chekhov's play, and its commentary on the politics of nation-building in post-colonial Africa, it is helpful to set out the historical context of Nigeria and the Biafra War in more detail.

Social and Political Context

The Berlin Conference (1884–1885)

The scramble for Africa and its partitioning by the European powers was in full flow prior to 15 November 1884 when the Berlin Conference was first held. It was attended by European colonial powers along with the United States and the Ottoman Empire to formalize their conquest of African territories, foster and protect their commercial interests. Due to the extractive nature of the colonial-capitalist enterprise, there was little or no consideration of the indigenous Africans, their traditional boundaries, cultures and traditions, evident by the fact that no Africans were invited to attend the conference. In essence, the Berlin Conference 'established the rules for the conquest and partition of Africa, in the process legitimising the ideas of Africa as a playground for outsiders, its mineral wealth as a resource for the outside world, not for Africans, and its fate as a matter not to be left to Africans'.⁴ As already noted, this mapping led to different ethnicities that were either historically hostile to one another or had no relations whatsoever being bound together. What infrastructure the Europeans built was to legitimise their claims to the territories and extract and transport resources that were located inland to the coastal cities such as Lagos, the city to which Lolo, Nne Chukwu and Udo in *Three Sisters* desire to return.

Indirect rule/Administration

The British adopted the system of indirect rule over their colonies, where British administrators ruled through traditional kings and chiefs. Where there were no systems of kingship and/or no clear boundaries between territories, the British invented chiefs, known

6 Three Sisters: After Chekhov

as warrant chiefs, and created localities and ethnicities for them to govern. It was in these divided territories that traditions were invented to legitimise these new chiefs. The British implemented this system mostly in Igboland, where *Three Sisters* is set, where in pre-colonial times, political power and administration was decentralized.

Indirect rule was first applied in India. It was first practised in Africa in the late nineteenth century in Natal in South Africa. The system was introduced to West Africa by Frederick John Lugard after seeing it in operation in East Africa.⁵ Lugard thought that indirect rule was suited to African traditional forms of government, but he took his cue from the feudalist Islamic northern Nigeria and applied it to all the ethnic groups within Nigeria. As such, indirect rule, 'relied on cultural essentialism through which subject peoples identified themselves as belonging to sub-nationalities'.⁶ What this means is that for indirect rule to work, people had to be made to see themselves as belonging to an ethnic group rather than a nation. Thus, their allegiance lay with their ethnic kin and region rather than with the British-created nation. Believing that Africans were essentially different to them, the British dealt with Africans as groups rather than as individuals, further creating the myth that Africans are tribal in nature compared to Europeans. The intensification of these differences would lead to several acts of violence culminating in the civil war.

The gap in development between the city and the country was another effect of British administration. Areas of importance to trade and administration like the capital city, were developed. Rural areas such as where *Three Sisters* is set were less developed, which is a major reason why the sisters pine for Lagos. Lagos was originally a colony ruled separately before it was incorporated into the Southern Protectorate of Nigeria, a protectorate being a country or territory protected by a stronger nation. The city, like Lagos, is a cosmopolitan space that provides opportunities to reject the fiction of colonial identities as with the characters in *Three Sisters*. They are not bound by traditional mores in the way that they were in the village. It is a melting pot in which the various ethnicities interact to form new nationalist and pan-Africanist identities.

The Formation of Nigeria

Nmeri You don't think the British are responsible? They created Nigeria, forced two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and languages together, created this pressure cooker, and now watch as it explodes.

Nigeria was Britain's most populous African colony. It comprised around three hundred ethnic groups, many of which had nothing in common. Before becoming a single colony, Britain controlled two territories as protectorates. The two protectorates were the predominantly Muslim Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, whose major ethnic group was the Hausa-Fulani. The Igbo and Yoruba dominated the Colony and Southern Protectorate of Nigeria. The Igbo were mainly Catholic Christian while the Yoruba were a mix of Christian and Muslim. On 1 January 1914, the two protectorates were merged to form Nigeria. When they were ruled separately there was no indication that they might become one country. Western education was widespread in the South through the establishment of schools by the Christian missionaries. The landlocked North adhered to Muslim traditional beliefs.

As Nigeria edged towards self-rule, the country adopted the Westminster parliamentary system of government. During negotiations leading up to independence, the Northern politicians extracted favourable conditions from the British, the most pertinent of which was regional autonomy. The Southern politicians, eager for self-rule, agreed to these terms. This led to the North dominating the political sphere by the time independence was achieved.

Regional autonomy led to the major ethnic groups dominating the minority ethnic groups within their boundary and a consequence of this was an inability to form a national identity. Nigeria was divided into three regions with the Northern Region being the largest and most populous, along with the Yoruba-dominated Western Region and the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region. Political parties formed along regional ethnic lines, replacing the old nationalist pre-independence parties. At the national level, due to the winner-takes-all first-past-the-post system, the main Northern party won the first parliamentary election and ruled in coalition with the party

representing the Eastern Region, while the party representing the Western Region went into opposition.

On 1 October 1963, Nigeria became a republic. By the time of the 1964 elections, the major political parties had formed new alliances. The southern alliance of parties focused on halting Northern dominance. The northern alliance won the election, which was boycotted in the southern regions. The unrest that attended the fallout led to the first coup and, eventually, civil war.

The Nigeria Civil War/Biafra War

On 15 January 1966, five army majors led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu launched a coup against the government. Several Northern leaders and high-ranking military officers of Northern and Western origin were killed. The coup was stopped by the most senior-ranking military officer, Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi who was Igbo and became Nigeria's first military ruler.

Aguiyi-Ironsi's actions were seen by the Northern leaders as an attempt by the Igbo to take over the country. Prominent Igbo politicians were unharmed during the coup. None of the coup plotters, four of whom were Igbo, were tried for treason. Aguiyi-Ironsi replaced the federal system with a unitary system which took power away from the regions and centralised it in the federal government. These actions confirmed Northern suspicions of an Igbo takeover and led to riots and retaliatory pogroms against the Igbo in the north. On 28 July 1966, a counter-coup by Northern officers led to the assassination of Aguiyi-Ironsi and the killing of several Igbo officers. On 1 August 1966, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon (later promoted to General), a northerner from an ethnic minority group, became head of state. The civilian regional premiers were replaced with military administrators, with Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu heading the Eastern Region.

Attempts at reconciliation between the Eastern Region and the Federal Government failed. Pogroms against the Igbo in the north continued. On 30 May 1967, Ojukwu announced that the Eastern region had seceded from Nigeria to become the Independent Republic of Biafra, which triggered the war on 6 July 1967 and it lasted until January 1970. During the war, the federal government instituted a blockade on Biafra, which led to scarcities and starvation.

Support from aid agencies like Caritas and the Red Cross created modern aid interventions as we know it and serves as a major plot development in the play: Abosede has an affair with Benedict Uzoma to gain access to scarce aid supplies and uses this to gain a dominant position in the house.

Ethnicity

Large cities, particularly Lagos, became melting pots where people from other parts of the country came in search of opportunities. The Igbos established businesses all over Nigeria which made them susceptible to reprisal attacks after the first coup. But, as seen in *Three Sisters*, personal relationships formed irrespective of the political and ethnic divisions. Despite the fact she is on the federal government side and is Yoruba, Abosede stays behind and marries Dimgba. Nmeri's mother is Hausa. Halima, one of Lolo's pupils is half-Hausa. The sisters are more attuned to the cosmopolitan life of Lagos. Lagos is not only their land of dreams, but also where their mother is buried. It is because their father wanted them to be closer to their roots away from British influence and the influence of a cosmopolitan space that he took up a new command and moved the family to Owerri, as Lolo explains early in the text: 'Papa wanted us to root ourselves in our Igbo traditions, here in Owerri, away from all the other tribes, to escape . . . what did he call it? Cultural Erosion?'

While taking pride in one's culture is admirable, it can also narrow one's vision if pride descends into chauvinism, which perpetuates arrogance and intolerance. At its worst, it is the root of divisions such as racism, tribalism, misogyny and sexism, where a non-native is seen as inferior and women are idealized as mothers of the nation destined to perform certain roles rather than be seen as individuals with personal wants and needs. Although Ellams highlights the role of colonialism in the Biafran tragedy, he indicts certain traditions that have determined the lives of the characters. The sisters' father arranged for Nne Chukwu to marry Onyinyechukwu even though he and Lolo were in love. The irresponsible and feeble Dimgba is the head of the family because he is a man. He loses the house because of his gambling habit. The war was fought because of the failure of the different groups to resolve their differences, costing millions of lives. Ojukwu, believing in Igbo