

SATIRIC DIMENSIONS OF POWER PLAY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S A PLAY OF GIANTS

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Abstract

Our society of today has come a long way in suffering certain ills, vices and malpractices, which have given rise to violations of standards, ethics, values, norms and codes of conducts, acceptable to all in the society. These aspects of moral decadence and bankruptcy have got to such levels that indiscipline and corruption have become the bane of those in leadership positions. Owing to these adverse situations, this paper sets out to investigate the satiric dimensions of power play in government circles as explored in Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*. Satire being a literary device in which the foibles, follies or vices of a person, mankind or an institution are held up to ridicule and scorn, and with the intention of correcting, this study looked into how the playwright employed these satiric devices to expose the negative attitudes of the leaders to public ridicule. The theoretical framework adopted is psychoanalysis. The play is subjected to textual analysis with data from diverse opinions and studies of scholars in journals, library texts and the internet. It was discovered that Soyinka ridiculed the evils of dictatorship, tyranny and oppression, suppression and acts of indiscipline among political leaders.

Keywords: Power, Oppression, Tyranny, Satire, Caricature, Corruption.

Introduction

The main relevance of a work of art in the society is generated from the writer's skill to criticize the social problems of that society. By doing this he becomes socially committed to his society. The writer is pictured as a societal voice when he takes up the responsibility of reflecting the happenings in his society. In recent times, the writer has taken his appropriate role as a social critic by exploring the depth of human conditions in the society. These situations have been placed as the center of focus while criticizing the society. A writer can be seen as a person whose work reflects human behavior and how these behaviors are perceived in the daily lives of the people in a given society. Chinweizu, Jemie

and Madubike in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* emphasize that the writer's job is to be: "... articulated, and to present to our audience the stresses and joys of our society as they take place, not just in the private psychological transformations of individuals, but also in their Public manifestations" (248). The writer studies the physical and mental state of man and presents them as they occur, He ought to apprehend, recreate the quality, flavor and vicissitude of life in the society for the readers. He does these by laying bare the people's actions observed around him and the urge to present the experiences inherent in their society. Through the characters in his work, he explores the various behavior of human beings. It is necessary to note that literature practically deals with the living situations of men and women, and displays life in all its rich varieties. By dealing with living situations, one major factor that cannot be avoided is changes.

The writer must be conversant with the changes in the society so as to have a strong foundation to base his criticism. Without observing these changes, he might go contrary to what is required from him by his people. He ought to criticize these changes, as they occur in order to be in line with the people's thoughts. Also, he should not delay in exploring effectively, these changes as they affect the lives of the people. For a writer to be able to explore the affairs of the society thoroughly there must be a link between him and the society. He can only ridicule the evil in the society and arouse the people's revulsion towards it when he is a part of that society. Ngugi in *Literature and Society in Africa* maintains that:

It is not enough for the African artist standing aloof to view society and highlight its weakness. He must try to go beyond this to seek out the sources, the causes and the revolutionary struggle which has destroyed the traditional power map drawn up by the traditionalist nations, (qtd. In Ker 199)

This is why Soyinka in *Literature and Society in Africa* states that: It is about time the African writer stopped being a mere chronicler and understood also that part of his essential purpose is to write with a very definite vision... "he must at least begin by exposing the future in a clear truthful exposition of the present" (qtd. In Ker 96).

Since his work can influence the people's way of life or reasoning, the writer endeavors to portray the pressing need of the society. He sees work as a tool through which the vices of the society can be exposed Through his writings, his society can be reformed because he has brought to the knowledge

of his people the social ill practiced in by his people. His message ought to be urgent and crucial so as to attract the attention of his audience. He is expected to mirror the lives of the people and to improve their minds so that they will learn from the experiences and the fate of the characters in the various works of the writer. His works should account for a large range of human manifestation, that is, it touches life in its entire ramification He should be concerned about the people's situation as a whole rather than interpersonal relationship. He also acts as a satirist. His people ought to be aware that a given condition is bad in order to bring change in attitudes. He also portrays realism through his works because by criticizing, he deals with real people, real situations and real environment. The role of the writer in the society is to reform, teach, and expose the vices of the society. Since absolute power corrupts absolutely, these people misuse the power in their possession. Soyinka shows this through Gunema's speech: ... to seek the truth of the matter, these Subversives, guierilleros, they do not Really seek to rule, no not to administer a space, not to govern a pueblo, comprehendo? No mostly they seek power. Simply power. (1)

Through the protagonist, Kamini (representing Idi Amin), Soyinka pictures the dehumanization meted out to the poor masses by a corrupt leader. Kamini, Kasco, Tobou, and Gunema are the giants reflected in the title of the play. They play with the lives of their people and destroy anyone who goes contrary to their opinion. They believe that they have the ultimate power over the people's lives and they pass a death sentence to any opposition. Kamini orders the bodyguard to flush the head of the bank manager in the toilet because he refers the Bulgara's money as 'not worth its size in toilet paper.' He is also in possession of all Bulgara's wealth and controls welfare of his country according to his selfish desire. He sees to the printing of Bulgara's money and travels with the money where ever he goes: "Whenever I travel, I take Bank of Bulgara with me, then nobody can steal money behind Kamini's back" (4). Soyinka points out the ease that these tyrants carry out their inhuman act without opposition. In the bid to acquire power, most of them attempt different obnoxious acts. Kamini tries to show of himself by placing his sculpture at the top of the stairs so that all delegates that pass there will see it. By doing this, he believes that he will gain more fame and exhibits his power. He sees it as an avenue of extorting money from the World Bank without stress:

... I wait now until my statue goes up in the United Nations. When everybody see it standing there i think it gives the World Bank something to think about. Is they who will come this side and beg me to talk business all over again. (9)

Guriema makes use of voodoo in order to acquire power. He sees it as the best whereby he is able to hypnotize the people so that they will begin to act like Zombies, which are to behave sheepishly. They do anything he wants them to do and dare not to go against his wish because they are already charmed. This practice is still observed in the present-day Africa. Most politicians indulge in rituals so as to acquire more powers to win the elections. By examining the past event, Soyinka also portrays the present society. Most politicians still believe in the power of Juju or voodoo and they do many odd things like kill and ritual sacrifices. Tubon acquires his power by eliminating all foreign influence from his people and waging war against his neighbouring towns.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework establishes a vantage point, a perspective, a set of lenses through which the researcher views the problem. In this sense, the selection of a logical framework is both clarifying and exclusionary step in the research process. While it sharpens focus and consequently increases clarity brought to the problem area, it excludes from the view of the inquirer other perspectives that might be brought to bear on the problem. The theoretical framework for the study therefore is Marxism. It is the political and economic theory of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels that interpret history as a continuing economic class struggle and belief that eventual results would be the establishment of a classless society and communal ownership of wealth of the nation.

Marxism is summed up in Enearta Reference Library as a theory in which class struggle is a central element in the analysis of social change in western societies. According to Swingewood Allen in his book *The Novel and the Revolution*, Marxism maintains that a Marxist writer is one who is conscious and fully aware of his own responsibility in the society. No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distanced from the oppressed (23). The Marxist, committed to human liberation does not become the prisoner of a circle of certainty within which he also imprisons reality. It is of paramount importance to note that since the modern society is a highly stratified one, any committed writer who is oriented towards Marxism automatically sets himself against the political elites. The political elite who is bent on maintaining the status quo cannot imagine a likely push in the great change tendency towards modern literature. Marxist theory holds that conflict which leads to radical ideas for a change are borne out of the displacement of the strata in the society. According to Ngara Emmanuel in his book *Art and Ideology in the African Novel*:

Social stratification and inequality are a historical part of our society and these are what Marxist writers are continually lighting against in our society. Through the change significant attention of social structures will be made. This will come in form of a revolution which is the displacement of one class by another (31).

Ngara says that every Marxist literary work is a protest against the deplorable human conditions against the unbridgeable gulf between what man professes of man when in the firm grip of fate. Man in all ramifications of life hardly gets optimal satisfaction and so protests against those situations and recommends most probable alternatives. The result of this line of thought is a Marxist literature, a proletariat literature that would eventually lead to a classless order. In quoting P.J. Brown's *The Proletariat Episode in Russian Literature*. Allen Swingewood states:

In a class society, literature serves the interest of a particular class and only through that class does it serve all humanity. Therefore, proletarian literature is such a literature organized by the psyche and the consciousness of the working class in the direction of the final talk of the proletariat as the creation of communist (classless) society (84).

The Marxist art, therefore, serves as a mirror with which the proletariats or the masses can see themselves and through which the social consciousness is developed. Ngara Emmanuel in his book *Art and Ideology in African Novel* posits the term Marxist art to refer to "works which depict reality from a Marxist point of view. Works which reflect the social structure of society and which present social struggle from the point of view of a class and promote the ideals of socialism (17). This kind of art is geared towards a change in basic mode of production and this change in the mode of production will result in a change in the structure of social classes: the eventual overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of proletarian dictatorship. It is pertinent to note that during the years of proletarian dictatorship, this working class-based literature took shape and evolved ideologically into a prominent position in world literature. Some have ascribed this form of literature to Marxist aesthetics and hereafter become popularly known as Marxist literature.

As a result of the endowment of the Marxist art, it has become unique and possesses some defining features. First, it must be faithful to life, that is, realistic to true life experiences and its simplicity is highly commendable. This simplicity of a Marxist literature is not just a question of coincidence but a

deliberate one aimed at making it a commonplace interest of great effectiveness. Hence, it is devoid of experiments, individual, religious, mystic, sexual themes and most importantly every sort of formation. Swingewood in his book also says that "Marxist writers pay less attention to form unlike realistic literature where much emphasis is laid not on what is said but on the way it is said" (17). Another feature of Marxist art is the positive hero. They must represent the so-called typical. This does not mean what is characteristic of the real state of reality but what would be desired for emulation, in all cases, these heroes are usually a manifestation of the ideal Marxist sense.

Marxist art calls for representation period which were in consonant with the communist theory. The implication of this is that it seems the results of deliberate limitation of the choice of subject matter in the part of the writer. According to Ngara Emmanuel, Marxism, therefore, is a means of consolidating their existing ideology in the socialist world (31). Charles Nnoli in his book *The Critics of African Literature* talks about "art that contemplates society we expect, art that is propagandist, art that tends towards proletarian concerns and art that has Marxist undertones" (33). Consequently, Adamu Kyuka Usman's *Hope in Anarchy* and Alexander Madiebo's *The Nigeria Revolution and The Biafran War* are works borne out of conflicts because of a people's resolve to liberate themselves from bondage which eventually resulted into war that destroyed lives and properties.

Satiric Dimensions of Power Play in Wole Soyinka's a Play of *Giants*

The name 'Wole Soyinka' is a popular one to those conversant with African literature. Soyinka noticing that the greatest lack in Nigeria is criticism, picks up his pen to explain the ease with which the government imposes harsh economic measures on the populace without pity. He also shows the readiness which any clique with military clout imposes itself on the people without fear of opposition.

His work *A Play of Giants* is centered on power and politics. He presents corruption as it is practised in the African society. Soyinka makes no effort in \ hiding the real-life actors who have served as models to this play. These real-life actors are: life President Mobutu Sese Seko of Congo, President for life Marcias Nguema (late) of Equatorial Guinea, Emperor for life (ex) Jean-Baptiste Bokassa of the Central Republic of Africa and the Hero of Heroes in the person of Life President (ex) the Field Marshal El-Haji DR Idi Amin of Uganda. These four leaders are regarded as the giants and they are tyrants who derive pleasure in maltreating the poor masses. Their reign aid to the decline of their countries.

The reign of Idi Amin brought about the loss of thousands of unrecognized producers, professionals, productive elites, workers and peasants who were brutally murdered during military regime in Uganda. This economic disaster still affects the people of Uganda till present day. Since absolute power corrupts absolutely, these people misuse the power in their possession. Soyinka shows this through Gunema's speech as quoted earlier. These four leaders believe that some people are born to rule while others are born to obey orders. Kamini orders his men to torture the sculptor who goes against his will by saying that his statue ought to be in the "Chamber of Horrors".

Imperialism is another major aspect that Soyinka explores. He pictures the interference of developed countries such as Russia, England and America on the economic and political affairs of developing country like Bulgara. They impose the economic and cultural system on the country they colonize. As Batey points out Bulgara is not only corrupt but: "She is still being exploited by a Neo-colonial conspiracy of multinational conglomerates which continue to prey on developing countries on the Third World" (.13). These developed countries in light of caring for the developing countries, use disguise and intervene in all matters affecting these countries. The Russians support Kamini in his rebellious deeds. They defend his office when accused by United Nations of committing genocide and violation of human rights to gain power over Bulgara. They also help Kamini during war by supplying arms. They do these so that they can possess the Bulgaran's territory. When they notice that Kamini is trying to raise his status higher than their president-Vladimir Llyich Lenin, they make jest of him by reducing him to a little kid whom needs a toy to play with. They see his sculptor as an intimidation and the rise of a developing country with the use of irony, the second Russian delegate makes caricature of Kamini and General Barra Tuboul (who exploits Africans shamelessly). Also, the United States delegates try to be friendly with Kamini and his country so that they will have power over their economic system. Imperialism can still be noticed in some African countries. In Iraq, for instance, the United States of America can be noted to have intervened in Iraq's government. They accused Iraq's president - Sudan Hussein of being a tyrant and a terrorist.

Coup can be seen as one of the characteristics of African countries. This is because most African countries, Nigeria to be precise has experienced different phases of military take over. Coup is defined as the violent way by which power is taken over by individuals in the society. Everybody wants to taste power. Gunema shows the level of which he is being obsessed by it: "That is why, always, I am searching to taste it. You understand, really taste it on my

tongue. To seize it a la boca, roll and roll it in the mouth and let it trickle inwards like an infusion" (21).

For power to be acquired instantly, force is applied because most leaders are in love with power and do not want to hand over. After exploiting, killing and exiling many Bulgarians, Kamini's regime is attacked by his people. Kamini believes that they are being sponsored by the United Nations and World Bank. He sees the presence of the Russians and the United States delegates as a threat to his office. The coup occurs at the end of the c 5. when all his deeds have been exposed. The people he sent on exile surround him and other corrupt head of states. This was exactly how Uganda removed the tyrant Idi Amin from office. In Nigeria, coup can be seen as a historical deed, it started with the take-over of power by the military from the civilians. The first time it occurred was in January 16, 1966 in which Aguiyi Ironsi ascended the throne of the head of state. Kamini finds out that he is alone in the coup because most of the staff have run away. They see Kamini as a master and difficult to understand. They are scared of saying anything in order not to provoke the great "Dr for life president." The ambassador runs away with a huge amount of money when she finds out that things are crumbling. Soyinka presents corruption practiced by top officials. Although the military regime is no longer in existence in most countries, people are still maltreated by their leaders. Kamini, Kasco, Gunema, and Tuboum belong to the group of oppressors. They reduce their people to mere slaves and eliminate any person they see as a threat to their office. They treat their people worse than their colonial master and exploit their nations. The people are at risk of losing their jobs and lives. The dangerous part is that powerful countries support these leaders so that they can achieve their self-interest. Idi Amin was maintained by group interest and ideologies that differ from those of Great Britain (which installed him in power). Many powerful countries supported his reign. These developed countries use the developing countries and abandoning them if they find them irrelevant. This is also the leaders use their people. Gunema sleeps with the woman whose husband is accused of plotting against him. After sentencing her husband to death, he murdered the woman because he believes that she will plan against him: "After the taste was gone, I have to do something. I begin to fear she is plotting to take revenge for her husband's death ...I had her garroted" (59). This was exactly what Idi Amin did to Byron Kadawa who had contributed greatly to the nation, he was brutally murdered by Idi Amin on his return from the Festival of Black and African Arts (festac) in Nigeria, 1977. The successor Dan Kintu together with John Male (a playwright) met the same fate.

Soyinka compares the act of these present leaders with that of the past heroes. He sees the deeds of heroes like Chaka, Lumumba, Nkrumah, and Jomo Kenyatta who fought for African liberation as running contrary to that of Kamini and his other Heads. He examines the peace and freedom that past heroes have built as shattered by evil and monstrous leaders who derive pleasure in their people's sorrow. The foreign affair minister with other ministers runs away in the middle of an international conference so as to save their lives. They escape through a shameful way by putting on tape recorder of conversations, which ought to be running, while they live through the lavatory window. Kamini shows his disapproval about this and points out the reason for this action:

A whole minister of state, his is playing tricks like 007 James Bond in order to run away with natural force. That is the ministers left in Bulgara...that is what results from imperialism and neo-colonialism and the culture they teach our people. Syphilitic culture (15).

Soyinka further exploits the African culture. In Bulgara, Kamini kills a lion at the age of seven (instead of thirteen) so as to test his manhood. This implies that, at the age of thirteen, a boy enters the bush leaves there until he kills a game so as to enroll into manhood. Kamini believes (according to Bulgara's belief) that one who comes to one's house when one is just beginning or in the middle of a meal, is a good friend; but one who arrives when one has finished a meal and is picking one's teeth has done something bad or will do so before the end of the day. This is what he uses in judging the secretary-general as being involved in the coup.

At the end of the play, Soyinka as a revolutionist presents the changes that people under such tyranny use to fight for their rights. He exposes Kamini as one who hates changes because of his love for power. Though the people rise against the injustice practiced by Kamini, there is no resolution at the end. Soyinka does not tell us the fate of Kamini and his people after the coup. It can be observed that Soyinka fails to do so because that though Idi Amin has been challenged and removed, there is that Uganda or most African countries have been liberated from opposition, sufferings, and intervention of the developed countries. He remains skeptical at the end. By criticizing real life events he plays the role of a satire.

Conclusion

In this paper, it can be noted that some of the changes observed in the society are brought by writers performing their primary functions. The writer takes very seriously his moral obligation to his society and tries to make the people to recognize the true nature of their problems. These he does by presenting a serious mood that can drive his message home. Soyinka exploits the contemporary realities in *A Play of Giants*. Soyinka bases his criticisms on a real-life event that occurred in Uganda during the reign of Idi Amin, He draws his inspiration from the happenings in his environment. He criticizes a particular aspect which is politics and leadership. With the writer performing its role as a satirist, the people will become conscious of what they do. The government officials who are corrupt and easily moved by the law or their conscience become terrified and conscious when publicly ridiculed or satirized. The people become conscious of their position in the society with the aid of the writer. In a corrupt society the writer through his works should be able to restore the people's rights. The writer helps to arrest, recreates the tone, flavor, texture of life in the society, he flushes out the ills in the society in order to reproduce a new one devoid of corruption, injustice and violence. By reforming the society, he is responsible for the increasing pace of social changes taking place in the society, his main concern is his society and how to teach good behavior and morals. This implies that, any writer who does not write for the sake of his society can never be a social critic.

Hence, there is a need for a writer to be totally committed to his people and society in order to perform his unique role as a social critic. It is also required that the writer should avoid generalization while criticizing so as to avoid exaggeration and societal harm. For future writers, it is right to treat the serious matters in the society so as to be able to carry his people along. The society will become a better place if all writers assume this proper role and the people will be saved from social vices and future harm if they can recognize the writer as a leader and a teacher.

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