

WOLE SOYINKA'S "A PLAY OF GIANTS": SATIRE AND BEYOND

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If satire exposes the follies of a society, a group of individuals, or an individual by reference to an ideal, Wole Soyinka is clearly a satirist in plays like *Opera Wonyosi* and *Kongi's Harvest*. Here he "invites us to assume his standards and share the moral indignation which moves him to pour derision and ridicule on society's failings".¹ In other words, he performs the two functions required of the satirist--the contempt he so rigorously employs is not an end in itself but rather a strategy which enables him to foreground an ideal, or the approximation of an ideal. In *Kongi's Harvest*, for instance, characters like Danlolu, Daodu and Segi, in their different ways, show that Kongi's power can be challenged. Then again, in *Opera Wonyosi*, Anikura, a character in the Brechtian mould, directly addresses the audience and stresses the danger of giving too much power to a person like him. *A Play of Giants*, which is an *exposé* of the bestiality and the chicanery associated with Idi Amin's regime, while retaining the ridicule, discards "the standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured";² consequently, the play cannot be regarded as a true satire. Although Katrak is accurate when she says that "one discovers an essential continuity in Soyinka's deepest concerns over the past twenty-six years"³, she is wrong in concluding that "the ironic repetitiousness of human violence ... can always be broken by an enlightened individual who can challenge historical forces and can forge a different future"⁴ because no such "enlightened individual" is presented in *A Play of Giants*. While acknowledging that Wole Soyinka employs satiric elements to provide some remarkable insights about "African tyrants past and present, pointing to their excesses, recalling their ill-deeds,

¹ James Ngugi [Ngugi wa Thiong'o] "Satire in Nigeria: Chinua Achebe, T.M. Aluko, and Wole Soyinka." *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*. Ed. Cosmo Pieterse and Donald Monro. London: Heinemann (1969) p.56.

² Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (1959) p.223.

³ Ketu H. Katrak, *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press (1986) p.9.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.164-65.

and drawing attention to the forces which manipulate them",⁵ this study asserts that *A Play of Giants* is not a satire *per se*. Instead, Soyinka gets his "message" across by showing Kamini at his worst; in this way, he is able to demonstrate the consequences of tolerating a tyrant's whims.

Soyinka states in his introduction that *A Play of Giants* is structured along the lines of Genet's *The Balcony*. Genet's play is set in a brothel, and the clients who patronise it seek to escape what they see as the tedium of existence by indulging in fantasy. By acting out their separate roles the clients are able to obtain what they do not have in their actual lives--power. *A Play of Giants*, like *The Balcony*, focusses on power and on the excesses of power. Yet, while Genet's play concentrates on a group of nondescript individuals, who dream of being able to dominate others or the world at large, *A Play of Giants* presents some "supermen" who already possess power and know how to employ it to their advantage. The character of K[amin]i is drawn with Swifitean regard for detail. Soyinka insists that Kamini is both buffoon and villain, and his skill as a dramatist is such that he is adept at demonstrating both characteristics.

The idiotic traits in Kamini's personality are most effectively conveyed in his fatuous statements and in the sequences in which he is lost in his delusions of grandeur. Consider the following examples:

After all, you common Makongo carver while Field-Marshal El-Haji Dr Kamini full Life President of sovereign [sic] state... Must try to kill two birds with one stone as you say in Queen Elizabeth English, not so? I like Queen Elizabeth, the royal family is my very good friend. Is why I like Gudrum. She reminds me something like the Queen Mother.⁶

When they see how their President like you, they will like you like a member of the family. You will become one of the family. Perhaps you even marry one of our girls eh? Good for world peace I always say. I like inter-marriage between all races.⁷

⁵ James Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka*. London: Macmillan (1986) p. 160.

⁶ Wole Soyinka, *A Play of Giants*. London: Methuen (1984) p.31.

⁷ *ibid.* p.29-30.

Here, Soyinka achieves his objectives by using caricature and ridicule, two of the oldest devices available to the satirist. His main purpose, however, is to demonstrate how Kamini and others of his ilk employ power to victimize others; that is, to illustrate the thesis that this tyrant is "at once a mischievous child and a brutal psychopath".⁸ Because they subsequently become Kamini's hostages, all the characters in the play, excepting the principal, are victims, but two individuals are singled out and subjected to the dictator's brutality: they are, the sculptor and the manager of the Bugara Central Bank.

The first interactions between the sculptor and Gudrum and the sculptor and Kamini provoke some humour. The sculptor has been given the job of making a model of Kamini for the new African section in Madame Tussaud's waxworks. Kamini, however, has other ideas. He commissions the sculptor to work on a statue which could be placed in the UN building. Later, when he is joined by the other African leaders, he forces the sculptor to include them too. The irony is patent. The Secretary General had invited "all permanent delegations to bring with them one work of art representative of their culture ... to be exhibited in the international gallery".⁹ Kamini responds by coercing the sculptor to make life-sized models of himself and of his fellow dictators. He hopes to have this "work of art" displayed in an even more prominent location in the UN. The audience's delight at witnessing Kamini's fatuous comments soon turns to horror, however. The sculptor declares to Gudrum in confidence that "this one [the model of Kamini] should go into the chamber of horrors,"¹⁰ and because she is Kamini's faithful acolyte, Gudrum conveys these remarks to her master. As a consequence, the sculptor is mercilessly beaten by Kamini's guards; so much so, that this individual, who appeared so self-assured at the beginning of the play, is now described thus: "He is swathed in bandages from head to toe. Only his arms appear uninjured. His eyes barely peep out from a mummified face".¹¹ Although Soyinka's treatment of the sculptor is somewhat sketchy, he is still representative of the many artists who are victimized by despotic regimes. In such an environment, the artist's integrity is maintained at a high cost, or discarded altogether.

⁸ Frank C. Rich, "Stage: 'A Play of Giants' by Wole Soyinka." Review. *A Play of Giants*, by Wole Soyinka (11th December 1984 c.21.) *The New York Times*.

⁹ Soyinka *op.cit.* p.38.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 28.

¹¹ *ibid.* 40.

The only character in his own regime to offer Kamini any serious advice is the Chairman of the Bugara bank. His integrity and his professionalism will not allow him to accept without protest Kamini's instructions to print "brand-new" currency notes, when the country has nothing to back it with. He responds to Kamini's commands with these words: "I'm trying to explain, Your Excellency. Even now, at this moment, our national currency is not worth its size in toilet paper. If we now go ahead and print more, it would...".¹² Kamini, however, is too obtuse to see the wisdom in these remarks; he construes, instead, that the chairman's words are an insult to him and to Bugara. Like the sculptor, the Chairman has to pay for daring to "challenge" the wisdom of the President for Life. He must be forced to eat "good old Bugara shit".¹³ Kamini suits his actions to his words by giving these instructions to his Task Force Special:

Take this coat-and-tie *Kondo* inside that toilet room there and put his head inside the bowl.... Each time the tank full, you flush it again over his head.... Push his head deep inside. I say deep inside. Put your bloody foot on his neck and press it down. (Sounds of gurgling.) That's better. Now pull chain.¹⁴

Such nauseating actions are, of course, not unique to Soyinka's Kamini. Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine, Albert Jarry's *Ubu*, and Albert Camus's *Caligula* humiliate their subjects in similar vein. These tyrants, however, either pay for their atrocities or discover, at length, the futility of their actions; yet Kamini experiences neither punishment nor remorse. By employing such a method to portray Kamini's dehumanized mind, Soyinka takes some risks. Soyinka's object, here, is to elicit sympathy for the victim. But the nature of the "punishment" Soyinka ascribes to Kamini is so eccentric, the episode so long--the Chairman is forced to endure this treatment for the duration of the play--that it is possible that the audience will, eventually, disregard or forget the point of the scene, or even consider it as a gratuitous exercise in grotesque humour.

In spite of some potential problems, however, the play as a whole portrays Kamini's megalomania with considerable artistic aplomb; the other dictators, however, rarely impress. Soyinka, in fact, recognises a problem, here. He stresses in his introduction that:

¹² *ibid.* 6-7.

¹³ *ibid.* 7.

¹⁴ *ibid.* 8.

No single play should even attempt to contain such a gallery of Supermen. I therefore shift the blame for this act of hubris to Jean Genet (*The Balcony*) who suggested the idea, that is, provided a model of form which might possibly attempt the feat. Naturally I absolve Genet of the short-comings in execution.¹⁵

The "short-comings in execution" are patent. Genet succeeds because his characters represent different *metiers*. They symbolize power in the legal, ecclesiastical, military, criminal, and Royal spheres. Consequently, he is able to examine power from different angles. Soyinka for the most part fails because these dictators are too much alike and all too obviously variations of Kamini. Soyinka does indeed provide these individuals with some ideological, national, and linguistic traits; furthermore, they are unambiguously cast as four recent rulers in Africa: Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea; Jean-Baptiste Bokassa of the Central African Republic; Mobutu Sese Koko of Congo Kinshasa; and, of course, Idi Amin of Uganda. Yet the suggestion of these shades of differences are by themselves insufficient to achieve the desired objectives. Even James Gibbs whose assessment of the play is very favourable makes this qualification:

Soyinka, incidentally, requires that the actors performing this play adopt a diversity of accents, but the lines he provides for them show little evidence of close attention to the varieties of English spoken by, say, Scandinavians, Russians, or Ugandans.... A greater attention to idiom would have improved the play.¹⁶

The other dictators, on the whole, are so dwarfed by Kamini that their roles seem to be redundant. Consider the sequence in which the dictators analyse the quintessence of power, the central motif in this play. Kasco asserts that one can only obtain the "pure realm of power" by "transcend[ing] the intrigues and mundaneness of politics".¹⁷ To this end, he has himself crowned, and soon after abolishes politics in his country. Guenama for his part sought power with the aid of "voodoo", but he only experienced it when a woman, under the impression that her actions would save her husband, sacrificed her body to this dictator. Toboum's approach is less "sophisticated." He is the leader of the "famed striped leopards of Mbangi-Guela." Like the others, he

¹⁵ *ibid.* v.

¹⁶ James Gibbs, *op.cit.* 154-55.

¹⁷ *ibid.* 21.

brooks no rivals, but unlike the others, he ensures "the re-absorption of that power of yourself which has been sucked away by profaning eyes"¹⁸ by eating his victims. He has, in fact, brought a few captured rebels to New York and suggests that, "we serve them up at cocktail party".¹⁹ No doubt this sequence substantiates Gibbs's point that Kamini, unlike the others, has "no interest whatever in abstract issues, no capacity for discussing power, no aptitude for self-analysis. but [sic], thanks to his Task Force Specials and the arms at his disposal, he is 'in power' throughout the play".²⁰ Indeed, as his reaction to these speeches demonstrates, Kamini is mystified, even impatient that the others should waste their time in words. This sequence, furthermore, allows Soyinka to change the mood, the direction, and the form of the play. With the reference to cannibalism, *A Play of Giants* leaves the naturalistic realm and becomes a macabre fantasy. Still, it is questionable whether this "discussion" advances the audience's knowledge of the nature of power in any significant way. None of the dictators here are particularly articulate, and they only reiterate what Kamini has already demonstrated all too well. The inclusion of these declarations in the midst of a work which is on the whole confined to action is a contrivance, and they ultimately reduce the dramatic impact.

For the greater portion of part one, Soyinka analyses the notion of power and demonstrates how it is abused; towards the end of this section, and in the whole of the second part, he denounces those groups which create and nurture monsters like Kamini. While Kamini and his "brothers" are what they are because of their megalomania, Soyinka insists that the rest of the world is equally culpable. He is, as J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada claims, "as much offended by those at the helm of oppressive regimes as by those who collaborate with them because it tacitly accepts or actively supports these regimes".²¹ The rest of the world is here represented by Mr Batey, and the Russian and American ambassadors to the United Nations.

In his introduction, Soyinka makes this indictment of the intellectuals who supported Amin:

¹⁸ *ibid.* 19.

¹⁹ *ibid.* 18.

²⁰ Gibbs, *op.cit.* 159.

²¹ J.O.J.Nwachukwu-Agbada, "Protest and Faith in Wole Soyinka's Autobiographies." *Literary Half Yearly* vol. 28.2 (1987) p.121.

Power calls to power ... the brutality of power (its most strident self-manifestation) evokes a conspiratorial craving for the phenomenon of "success" which cuts across all human occupations. This may be one of the many explanations why some of the most brilliant men of science and the humanities bend their skills and intelligence to ensuring the continuity of power even in its most brutal, humanly exorbitant manifestation.... It certainly makes it easier to understand why some of our own colleagues, including those of the Left, could find it possible to rationalise and applaud the crudest excesses of an Idi Amin.²²

Professor Batey is the academic stooge *par excellence*. At his first entrance, he is described as a "beadle" who "carries a golden key on a red velvet cushion".²³ In this scene, he accompanies the Black mayor of Hyacombe who grants Kamini freedom of the city for giving black people "pride of race," and for lifting them out of "degradation of centuries of conquest, slavery, and dehumanisation".²⁴ These lines are extremely ironic because the mayor praises Kamini for removing the very vices that the latter perpetrates, yet the satire in this episode is mostly directed at Professor Batey. When he discovers that he has been abandoned by most of his staff, Kamini offers Batey the post of advisor, an "honour" he readily accepts. He soon becomes Kamini's greatest ally, and loses no time in rationalizing the dictator's excesses. He assesses the situation in Bugara in these glib words:

The problems of Bugara were purely economic--as a sociologist, I saw that only too clearly. Bugara has not only inherited a discredited economic system from its colonial history, she is still being exploited by a neo-colonial conspiracy of multi-national conglomerates which continue to prey on developing countries in the Third World.... What sickens one most of all is the hypocrites who raise the diversionary scarecrow of human rights.²⁵

Completely ignoring the evidence before his eyes, Batey blames all Bugara's political, economic, and other woes on colonialism and neo-colonialism. Such

²² Soyinka, *op.cit.* p.vi.

²³ *ibid.* 21.

²⁴ *ibid.* 22.

²⁵ *ibid.* 23.

"ignorance," Soyinka concludes, is "willed, not fortuitous".²⁶ This intellectual learns too late the consequences of his actions. When Kamini takes the secretary-general, the members of the United States and Soviet delegations, and the African heads of state hostage, Batey tries to remonstrate; but his efforts are rebuffed thus:

[Kamini] (Gives him a back-handed swipe that knocks him flat on his back). You sneak up behind me again like that and you soon smell your mother's cunt. Get over there. You are CIA I think, to come behind a man like that.²⁷

If Batey provides Kamini and his regime with intellectual sustenance, the American and Soviet governments, at various times, furnish him with the military wherewithal that sustains him in power. Their misguided aid ultimately allows him to victimize even his powerful "benefactors." One example will suffice to demonstrate how the super powers pander to Kamini's vanity and help to perpetuate his bloody reign. The Second Russian states:

Your Excellency, when the US and the United Kingdom removed their military experts, we stepped in and re-armed your armed forces. We provided you MIGS and trained your pilots. Who stepped in to train your Security Forces, enabling you to defeat coup after coup attempt?... Thanks to our information you were able to purge your army of traitors and their quisling collaborators right inside your cabinet.²⁸

Neither the Russians nor the Americans are oblivious of Kamini's excesses. The Russians, for instance, make their real attitude to Kamini known when they speak to each other in their own tongue. The First Russian says, "Tell the overgrown child to enjoy himself tearing off the Babushka's limbs instead of those hapless Bugaran workers and peasants".²⁹ These conclusions are no doubt correct, but they only make a greater indictment of the Russians' own complicity and chicanery. Once it becomes clear that

²⁶ *ibid.* vi.

²⁷ *ibid.* 68.

²⁸ *ibid.* 48.

²⁹ *ibid.* 45.

Kamini's power is on the wane, the super-powers nonchalantly "abandon him to his fate".³⁰ The Russians especially conclude that "his presence in power"³¹ no longer coincides with their "interests",³² and as Frank Rich declares:

In Soyinka's view, these power brokers are all guilty of ignoring the dictator's human rights abuses when it suits their geo-political or ideological ends. Not until Kamini's excesses threaten to undermine or embarrass his patrons' self-interests is he at last shunned by the left and right, blacks and whites.³³

The super powers decide to disown Kamini, but they have underestimated the nature of the monster they have created. Infuriated by the desertions from his ranks, by the duplicity of his patrons, and by his own parlous situation, Kamini takes everyone hostage, and launches an attack on the protestors outside. The room, which in the first part was described as a plush studio, now becomes a prison and a fortress, and *A Play of Giants* ends with this thought-provoking stage direction:

*Kamini swings back into the room, his gun aimed directly at the Hostages. Their horror-stricken faces in various postures--freeze. The Sculptor works on in slow motion. Fade.*³⁴

Soyinka wants the audience to leave the theatre with horror writ large on their faces too. The play insists that dictators do not arise from nowhere. Kamini has become what he is because he was ably assisted by the super powers and the intellectuals. If the sponsors of such individuals are not careful, the play seems to suggest, they too will succumb to a tyrant's whims.

A Play of Giants is perhaps the only play in Soyinka's *oeuvre* which discards completely the mimes, the dances, the heightened language, and the other resources of the theatre that his audience has come to expect as *donees*. This implies no criticism, but

³⁰ *ibid.* 56.

³¹ *ibid.* 56.

³² *ibid.* 56.

³³ Frank Rich, *op.cit.* C 21.

³⁴ Soyinka, *op.cit.* 69.

it is significant that he should leave out here the devices that had previously enabled him to reinforce his authorial comment. True enough, Soyinka at one point in his career, was uneasy with the role of artist as teacher. He says, in an interview with Nkosi, I think my prime duty as a playwright is to provide excellent theatre.... I don't believe that I have any obligation to enlighten, to instruct, to teach: I don't possess that sense of duty or didacticism.³⁵

This attitude changed with time. But even when he maintained his previous stance, Soyinka always provided "excellent theatre" and, *pace* his own assertions to the contrary, his plays, in general, generated a moral vision. As Etherton enunciates:

His [Soyinka's] satire and parody are directed against society itself and its power structures. His criticism is bound up with his metaphysics, and, in his terms, goes well beyond an attack on any particular system. Instead, it reaches towards an understanding of the fundamental basis of man's existence.³⁶

A Play of Giants, on the other hand, though set up as a satire, provides no criterion of judgement. The peccant characters and institutions are denounced with the contempt they deserve, but Soyinka is satisfied to leave it thus. Some critics, conclude otherwise, however. Frank Rich suggests that, "The only character of integrity on stage is the sculptor, who might well represent the playwright: in the evening's final image, the artist, severely wounded but undaunted, continues to work as bullets and explosions rock the embassy".³⁷ Ketu H. Katrak argues, in similar vein:

The playwright's historical imagination once again holds out hope in the artist for instance, in the Yale Repertory production of *A Play of Giants*, as the lights fade at the end, the spotlight lingers on the sculptor who, though severely beaten up and wounded, continues to work in the midst of a hostile environment.³⁸

³⁵ Soyinka, Interview. with Lewis Nkosi. *African Writers Talking*. ed. Cosmo Pieterse and Denis Duerden. New York: Africana (1974) p.173.

³⁶ Michael Etherton, *The Development of African Drama*. London: Hutchinson Library for Africa (1982) p. 242.

³⁷ Rich, *op.cit.* c.21.

³⁸ Katrak, *op.cit.* p.165.

There is no doubt that the sculptor represents the artist, but this does not make him an icon. Rich's and Katrak's large claims would be valid only if the sculptor were involved in a project against Kamini's regime. This sculptor shows little opposition, however. Spurred on by the threat of further punishment, he works on a replica of Kamini, which he feels is only fit for "The Chamber of Horrors." The sculptor, as a consequence, is not an *ieron* to the *alazon*, Kamini.

To insist that *A Play of Giants* is not "a virtuoso satirical display",³⁹ to point out that it provides no moral alternative is not to belittle the work, however. Soyinka makes use of satiric elements, but in the end the play moves beyond satire. In this context, a comment made by Philip Toynbee, in 1953, is still very relevant. He declares:

Satire will surely remain a means of human expression so long as there is human folly and wickedness to satirize. But there are periods when satire falls into abeyance, not through lack of follies and wickedness, but because things have gone too far for satiric treatment: disaster seems to be out of all proportion to any conceivable degree of human responsibility.⁴⁰

Kamini is clearly a "disruptive" leader who "sets out deliberately to confound expectations, to break established rules and procedures, to confuse people, and to turn the world upside down".⁴¹ What is worse is that the super powers, the intellectuals, and the masses by their lethargy or support have allowed Kamini's diabolical scheme to succeed. Small wonder, then, that "satire" no longer applies in a play of this kind--all those who could have generated the norms are guilty of keeping Kamini in power.

The vision that Soyinka projects in this play is undoubtedly apocalyptic, but it would be untrue to conclude that the purpose of the play is to portray life, *a la*, Zola; in other words, to show dictatorship as it is. James Gibbs attributes this purpose to Soyinka:

Through this play written with tears straining at the ducts, manic laughter in the throat and teeth set in a grin of grim defiance, he

³⁹ Gibbs, *op. cit.* p.158.

⁴⁰ Arnold Toynbee, quoted in *Contemporary Satire* by David J. Dooley Toronto: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, (1971). p.14.

⁴¹ T.G. Bailey, *Humbuggerly and Manipulation: The Art of Leadership*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1988) p.5.

[Soyinka] intended to upset and enrage, to tear the bandages from the wounds of a continent and to force the people to watch the blood to flow.⁴²

There is yet another positive, though less histrionic, way of approaching this play. Thomas Hardy claims, in his poem, *In Tenebris* 2, that "If way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst".⁴³ Surely, this suggests another method of coming to terms with the bestiality, the violence, and the bleak vision that permeates *A Play of Giants*? The year the play was published, Elaine Saint-Andre declared, that, "fundamentally he [Soyinka] remains an idealist who feels ill at ease in his role as a political activist, while a new conception of his duty towards his fellow-men persuades him of the necessity to become one".⁴⁴ Soyinka displays no such insecurity, here. "Drama either as literature or as theatre," Chidi Amuta asserts, "has been compelled to display a sense of commitment [in Africa]",⁴⁵ and Soyinka's plays are no exception. He is as committed in his opposition to dictatorial regimes as, say, Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, but he chooses to adopt a different strategy in his presentation. The play neither posits any remedies nor provides any criterion of judgement, but by concentrating on Kamini's excesses, the irresponsible actions of those who support him, and the parlous situation of his victims, it creates a sense of awareness in the audience. Awareness, after all, is the prelude to any action.

⁴² Gibbs, *op.cit.* 60-61.

⁴³ Thomas Hardy, *The Collected Poems*: Ed. James Gibson. London: Macmillan (1976) p.169.

⁴⁴ Elaine Saint-Andre, "Political Commitment in Nigerian Drama 1970-83." *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* vol. 7.1 (1984) p. 37.

⁴⁵ Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature: Implications for Practical Criticism* London: Zed. (1989) p. 154.