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Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*: A Satire on African Sociopolitical Intrigues

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Abstract

This analysis is a critical investigation into the socio-political scenario of Africa as discussed in Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*. It also discusses how far this play can be read as a satire on the evil power politics of the world. The African leader's obsession to power, cruelty and corruption ignoring the past glorious tradition of their countries, leading to the marginalization of its subjects into the hands of poverty and death are also dealt with here. The main characters who represents despotism includes Field-Marshal Kamini (late Idi Amin, deposed president of Uganda), Emperor Kasco (Jean-Bedel Bokassa, former Emperor of the Central African Republic), Benefacio Gunema (late President Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea), and General Barra Tuboum (late President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire). This paper has tried to probe deep regarding the features of power and its change, the mockery of power politics and the need for justice and equality among human beings. It reveals how Wole

Soyinka has tried to echo the necessity of a humanitarian change through the portrayal of stark realities.

Keywords

Politics; Power; Satire; Wole Soyinka; *A Play of Giants*.

Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* portrays the African leader's obsession to power, cruelty and corruption ignoring the past glorious tradition of their countries, leading to the marginalization of its subjects into the hands of poverty and death are also dealt with here. The main characters who represents despotism includes Field-Marshal Kamini (late Idi Amin, deposed president of Uganda), Emperor Kasco (Jean-Bedel Bokassa, former Emperor of the Central African Republic), Benefacio Gunema (late President Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea), and General Barra Tuboum (late President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire). This paper has tried to probe deep regarding the features of power and its change, the mockery of power politics and the need for justice and equality among human beings. It reveals how Wole Soyinka has tried to echo the necessity of a humanitarian change through the portrayal of stark realities.

From birth till death one is cradled in the halo of stories and thus the role of stories in defining the identity of an individual as well as the role played by the society is commendable. Human beings are found to be thinking and speaking in a narrative format. This narrative pattern has a decisive role in understanding human thought, which also explore how one makes out meanings from the social and political activities of the society (Mishler 117).

Even though the four giants depicted in the play were thrown out of their office by the rebels, the whirlpool of destructions they created in the sociopolitical and economic spheres of their countries is felt in the present era also. The ethnic conflicts seen in countries such as Nigeria and Liberia, the

political upheavals caused by the militaries of various African nations, the marginalization of the poor resulting in the widening of the gap between the poor and the rich can be viewed as the result of their rule. Here lies the significance of the play called the *A Play of Giants* by Wole Soyinka. The play should be read along with the contemporary socio political scenario of the countries that are still struggling to free themselves from the military dictatorship.

The play satirizes the various phases of power that are colossal and indivisible, such as economic, rhetorical, political, military, sexual and technological. The tyrants of African nations who are ready to pawn their nation and the super powers who try to possess the weak third world nations are mocked at by the author. These giants are not ready to transcend from the throne into the midst of the people, on the other they uses their selfish powers to eliminate those who raise their voice against injustice. Their subjects are looked upon by them as silly creatures without any self-esteem. These leaders give no room for human self-expression and exploit the helpless masses. “They derive pleasure in wars, ‘we fight, we kill or we die’... They see themselves as being born to rule and refer to themselves, especially Kamini, as Life President” (21-26). These tyrants are picturized as the manifestation of cruelty, who are running behind pompous titles and self appreciation. The evil of their power even goes on as far as exploiting the dignity of womanhood by imposing forced sex on them (58-63). But by the end of the play it is revealed that they are mere straw men with a lot of internal weakness and emptiness. Thus power is shown and took to the maximum just to release it from heights.

The megalomania of Kamini for power drives him to carve and exploit the various sectors. But he depends on the rhetoric of black liberation, independence, struggle and an anti-imperialistic outlook to give good reason for the mass assassinations and tortures that he inflicts on the subjects. But, contrary to what he expected, he positions himself before the readers as

political brute and a heartless tyrant. The author's intention is to ask the rest of the world to take half of the responsibility for what has happened, is still happening and also for watering tyrants like these impotent rulers.

The role played by the super powers to exploit Africa's underdevelopment and the evil rulers, there by deepening the already existing crisis is also represented by Soyinka in the play. Apart from utilizing these regimes in order to satisfy their political and economic needs, they encourage conflicts between countries for selling their arms. They are indicated by the playwright for their double standards and the unethical conception of international relations. Even the language they employ in diplomacy is filled with intrigues and betrayal. The pliability of human existence and its urge for freedom is stamped in *A Play of Giants*. It echoes the fact that the harmonious traditional world created by the Africans is toppled down by a strange one.

A Play of Giants has used humour and wit as a means for social criticism, even though the characters and the theme taken are serious. Kamini, besides his ignorance, has acquired so many titles from various parts of the world and he calls himself the Life President, El- Haji. He is willing to correct himself as "Dr Life President" from "Mr. President" (38). The brother despots of Kamini also instills humour into the play and to the serious actions in it. The exposition of their fears shown by the author as "Tobourm on hearing a dull explosion "dived beneath the nearest chair..." (63) when Kamini flaunted of destroying the whole UN building with all the war weapons creates humour. Gunema, who is another despot begs to leave the embassy by saying "...I think, if the functionario come back, then we your brothers can go. So we go now I think, yes?" (65). Thus the aristocratic, serious and fearless atmosphere created among the audience by the preceding speeches of these rulers throws people to laughter with all the farcical kind of actions.

The lack of adequate leadership is also discussed through this play. The vain attempt made by these leaders for covering up the corruption they does is

satirized as a line drawn on water. This is highlighted here as one of the political realities. And through this he has exposed the truth that the only instrument for exposing bad governance is through satire, which he has also mentioned in one of his works as “the man dies in all who keep silent” (13). The play is dedicated to Byron Kadwa who used art form for criticizing injustice, which Soyinka says “Byron Kadawa, to whom this play is dedicated is representative of the many thousands whose contribution to the nation of their birth was brutally cut short by Idi-Amin. He led his theater troupe to the Festival of Black and African Arts (FESTAC) in Nigeria, 1977” (viii). Most of the main characters of the play are depicted as intellectually impotent and illiterate. The representative of the group of oppressors, Kamini, is brought to the readers as an illiterate fellow. It is evident from his speech as well as his actions. In one of his speeches where he says “Gudrum very good friend of African Leaders. She writing book about me with many photographs. She calling it The Black Giant at Play. It show Kamini very jovial family man. Big uncle to everybody in country.” (2) shows that he is an illiterate. He is not fully aware of the political and social environment, but a credulous man who can be easily deceived. Characters are used for social criticism by employing symbols, such as in the situation where he describes Kamini’s approach while going to answer nature’s call. Soyinka describes it as

KAMINI has taken off his jacket. He lays it very carefully over the back of his chair. He *unbuckles his belt and moves towards the toilet door. KAMINI is seen lowering his trousers, then his bulk onto the toilet seat, remaining visible from the waist up through the door.* (32).

This has to be read parallel with Hodgkiss, who says “The Greeks used nakedness for the purpose of degradation, the phylax... show god and heroes, Zeus and Oedipus ludicrously undressed with erect phalluses. Nakedness reduces man from god-like to animal” (118).

The play can be considered as a perfect example for a work of art that showcases the political and social realities of the African world. As literature is the fictional representation of reality, Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* provides the society an opportunity to think and to view society on behalf of it, leading to its betterment.

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