

# A Satirical Reading of Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*

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**Abstract:** Satire is the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards its attitudes manner in which the follies and foibles or vices are unmasked by the satirist. The great modern age of satire was the neo-classic period when the satiric spirit was everywhere present and a return was made to formal verse satire. This paper examines how Soyinka has responded to the socio-political and economic situation in Africa by creating *A Play of Giants*. It also examines how Soyinka, a sensitive playwright, in *A Play of Giants* mirrors events in the African society in such a daring and imaginative manner by satirizing them. The findings reveal that Soyinka presents his characters as hollow men to show their worthlessness and emptiness despite being at the helms of power. Soyinka reveals the hollowness of the characters exposing their linguistic incompetence. This study identifies some devices technically deployed by Soyinka to include irony, humour, wit, sarcasm and symbolism. Through the use of satire, Soyinka targets African political leaders who have become monsters because of the powers they wield. Wole Soyinka uses satire to raise the consciousness of the people and prick the conscience of the ruling political elite in Africa.

**Keywords:** Satire, Modern African Drama, *A Play of Giants*, Satirical Devices

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## 1. Introduction

Satire is one of the tools used to expose the ills and anomalies in societies. Its use has been widely explored in literary texts and news reports. There is also the use of satire in other forms of visual and verbal texts. This implies that satire is pervasive in virtually all areas of human endeavour and its multifarious presence is felt in virtually all spheres of human engagements. For instance, its manifestations have been widely researched in newspaper cartoons, music, computer-mediated communications and other facets of human interactions. Apart from the use of satire, traditional African societies also engage the use of folklore, proverbs, humour and sarcasm as tools of measuring, assessing and correcting the ills inherent in the society.

African writers engage the use of satire to interrogate the state of affairs, even in poetry [1, 2]. This implies that the use of satire cuts across all genres of literature. Wole Soyinka is one of the African writers who constantly interrogated African politics during the post-colonial period. Politics in

post-independent African countries was marred by bitterness, hatred, and oppression. Even before the independence of many African states, several works of art have used satire as a tool to critique the colonial government and demand for self-government. When independence came, people awaited the long-envisioned development that should be accompanied with self government. However, certain rulers on the African continent turned themselves into tyrants and many African countries witnessed political instability. Some democratically elected governments were toppled and there were also several counter-coups. African writers like Soyinka, wa 'Thiongo, Osundare were not unaware of this development as they responded to these issues in their writing. Before *A Play of Giants*, Soyinka had written *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) [3] and *Opera Wonyosi* (1981)[4] – all with interest in African political affairs.

Among many challenges that the postcolonial African states faced is the abuse of power by the political leaders. Many countries struggled for sustenance under several dictatorial leaders. In Nigeria for instance, the post-

independence period saw a full development of satiric literature, especially drama. Soyinka is a playwright and social critic who relentlessly opposes repression, injustice and tyranny by responding to the socio-political and economic situations in Nigeria in particular and Africa at large. It is amidst the anomalies in the post-independent African states that Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* was written to critique the African situation, most especially the post-colonial dictators on the African continent. Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* is a realistic play that exposes and satirises the evils in politics practiced by leaders in the African society.

The use of satire in Nigeria contemporary poems is the focus of Akingbe's study [1]. The work demonstrates how satire is used in selected poems to criticize aspects of Nigerian society. The study examines the poems of poets such as Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Femi Fatoba and Odia Ofeimun. His study examines how the selected poets use proverbs, irony and artistic elements rooted in African tradition to criticize the society. Jeyifo [5p. 95] points out that the targets of Soyinka's satire "are (primarily) the Nigerian military dictatorships of the initial phase of the 'oil boom' years" in Nigeria.

Existing studies on Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* have focused on the linguistic techniques, lexico-grammatical features and stylistic devices used in the text. The present study is concerned with the use of satire in the text, most especially, how its use is capable of effecting the desired change in the society. One of the tools used in post-independence Africa to address social and political issues is satire. This paper aims to illustrate how Wole Soyinka, through his text, employs the use of satire to point out the social vices in the society with the aim of correcting these anomalies. The paper aims to identify the satirical techniques employed in Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*.

## 2. Satire as a Literary Art

Satire has been defined as 'a literary manner, which blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved' [6]. There are specific features through which satire may be identified. Satire is critical, employs wit and humour, ridicules the target, aims at individuals or institutions, and most importantly, may be used to provoke or prevent a change [7, p 20]. This implies that a satirical work will contain some or all of the above-listed features. Satire is a means through which the prevailing irregularities and moral excesses of a person, a group of people, a race, an institution or even a nation are exposed to ridicule. Follies and vices are held up to ridicule by the satirist by unmasking them. Although the subject matter is often comic, its objective is not merely to evoke laughter but laughter for corrective purposes.

The aim of satire is to focus on the problems in the society. For Wa Thiong'o [8], it is the duty of a satirist to set certain standards for a society and evaluate the society based on these standards. A satirist then lampoons the society when the expected standards are not upheld. This is why a satirist as 'a

defender of communal norms and virtues.'

Satire has been in existence for a long period. Notable among the English verse satires of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century were Samuel Beckett's attack on the puritans in the mock-epic "Hudibras" (1663). The 18<sup>th</sup> century also brought about such major satires as Alexander pope's "The Dunciad" (1728), Samuel Johnson's poems "London" (1738) and "The Vanity of Human Wishes" (1749). Satiric prose also flourished in the British Isles, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It included Jonathan Swift's harsh attack on corruption in religion and state in "A Tale of a Tub" (1704) and on mankind in "Gulliver's Travels" (1726).

## 3. Soyinka's '*A Play of Giants*' as a Contemporary Political Satire

The post-independent Africanera saw a full development of satiric literature. Since literary works are not created in a vacuum, they are engendered by the events in the African society. The focus of Nigeria literature has over the years been on the socio-political and economic problems plaguing the Nigerian society. These socio-political and economic problems are also prevalent in many African countries. The root of these problems could be traced to the political upheavals, which has bedeviled the Nigerian society from the 1940s when nationalist movements got underway, people were made to believe that political independence would usher in the millennium, solve all social problems and create a better life for everyone. In 1960, independence was granted to Nigeria and the Nigerian political elite took over the reins of governance. In the Euphoria that accompanied independence, people had high expectations to witness a democratic, peaceful and just society. However, within a few years of political independence, disillusionment set in, especially after the discovery of crude oil. It then became clear that the leaders were more interested in enriching themselves and would stop at nothing to remain in power. The effect of such unsavoury leadership resulted in military coups and counter coups. This led to the emergence of despots in Africa who inflict severe hardships on the masses and remain insensitive to the plight of the common man. The military who took over the reign of the government are however not better than the corrupt civilians.

Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*, parades four major actors who are also specifically targeted at four African dictators – Kamini (Field-Marshal Idi Amin Dada of Uganda); Kasco - Jean-Baptiste Bokassa of the Central African Republic; Gunema - Nguema of Equatorial Guinea; and Tuboum - Mobutu of Zaire (Congo Kinshasa). Soyinka admits that 'no serious effort is made here to hide the identities of the real-life actors'. These African rulers dominated the political scene in the 1970s and they committed great atrocities among their people. This is what is called 'a gruesome quartet of real-life African dictators' [9]. The African despots the play is aimed at are directly presented by Soyinka.

Faced with these realities of power and politics, writers

have had to reappraise their roles in society. Nigeria dramatists like Osofisan, Soyinka employ satire in their plays as an avenue to attack the prevailing socio-political vices. Soyinka has responded to the socio-political and economic situation in Nigeria in particular and Africa at large by creating *A Play of Giants* [11]. This play can be seen as a continuation of Soyinka's attacks on Africa dictators and a personal denunciation of all that Idi-Amin and his "brothers" stand for.

While there are despots in other parts of the world apart from Africa who could make anyone think about the universality of Soyinka's message, Soyinka's was specifically targeted at Africa. For instance, Pol Pot (the dictator of Cambodia from 1975 to 1979), Augusto Pinochet (Military dictator of Chile from 1973 to 1990), Leopoldo Galtieri (Argentine general and President from December 1981 to June 1982) and Papa Doc Duvalier (notorious despot of Haiti from 1957 to 1971) were all tyrants within this period. Some of these African tyrants have also taken inspiration from some of these characters. For instance, Gunema is inspired by Papa Doc Duvalier whose reign in Haiti was also full of terror. Soyinka's message was however inspired by the worsening political situations on the African stage.

Soyinka also notes the pretense of the intelligentsia to support the despotic leaders. Intellectuals who are meant to serve as the think-tank of the society have also turned to sycophants who have betrayed the public with the knowledge they have acquired. Soyinka exposes the role of the international community, journalists and scholars in aiding the continued suppression of people's rights through the support they give to the dictators.

Intellectuals include a group of people which included novelists, journalists, university professors whose interests lie in constant interrogation of the state of affairs for progressive reasons. Public intellectuals suggest necessary changes for the reorganizing of a society. This is because they are strong voices that help shape public opinion about issues. As a result of this, public intellectuals should 'transcend the realm of modest academia to perform selfless, long-lasting acts that make them living legends [12]. They are thus expected to be the architect of good ideas that will reconfigure the society. Thus, they have a crucial role to play in building a society. The first is to expose the follies of tyranny which will in turn garner revolt against the repressive government. They have to serve as a torch that beams brightly to illuminate the right path a society should follow.

#### 4. Hollowness and Character Presentation in Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*

The effort of a man many a time to hide his flaws in a state of power drunkenness or moral vacuity is usually akin to that of the Ostrich which in an attempt to hide from his enemies buries its head while its massive body is left uncovered. This

is exactly what the playwright satirizes amongst the characters, especially the protagonist of the play.

In satirizing these characters, the playwright presents them as essentially a bunch of hollow men, characters who feel important because of the power at their disposal but are unable to disguise their emptiness and aridity despite the power they wield. Through their actions in the play, they all seem to be chanting T. S. Eliot's poem *Hollowmen*. The chief protagonist Kamini, being the representative of the consortium of despots, is depicted as a stark illiterate not only through his speech but also through his actions. Despite his claims to many titles, he cannot speak grammatically correct English. An instance of this is when he expresses his pride over the books being written on him by Gudrum. 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. (P. 2)

Kamini's linguistic incompetence was at the fore in the play. He is presented as someone who cannot construct meaningful strings of sentences. These sentences are grammatically incorrect. In each sentence, the intensive verb 'is' is omitted. There is a recurrence of this incompetence to express himself in correct English in the play. His brother despots, Kasco and Gunema also make a lot of grammatical mistakes in expressing themselves in English.

His linguistic incompetence during communication is as bad as his ignorance of ideas. He also orders the Chairman of Bugara Central Bank to return and print more notes as the solution to the shortage of money when his request for a loan was denied. The Chairman was punished for his advice for advice against more notes. In Kamini's words:

I said go back and get cracking with government mint. When I return I want to see brand-new currency notes in circulation, not hearing all this grumble of shortage of money and so on and so forth. (p. 6)

Sycophancy is identified as one of the bane of development in Africa. Gudrum, the Scandinavian journalist is used as an actor to show the ineptitude of journalists who allow themselves to be used as an accomplice in the brutal administration of the affairs of the people. Their inactions helped in the continued suppression of the people's lives. This shows how journalists have become an appendage of the government, thus making it difficult for them to serve their expected functions. The sycophancy of Gudrum plays out when Kamini's requests for a loan was turned down by the World Bank. She states:

It's a plot my Life President. It is part of their deliberate economic sabotage. (p. 6)

Soyinka identifies the journalist of complicity in the rottenness of the society. Gudrum, the Scandinavian journalist represents the members of this profession. She abandons the ethics required of her profession and takes the role of an employee in Kamini's government. This affected her worldview of things as she could not present issues objectively anymore. Rather than project the true state of

affairs in Bugara, she works to discredit the genuine complaints of the people. She speaks about her activities:

It would be finished by now if I didn't have to take time dealing with the slander spread by those Bugaran runaways in my country. They spread the most disgusting libel against the Field-Marshal. They are pouffes, most of them. Faggots. (Pg. 2)

The intellectual in *A Play of Giants* represented by Professor Batey betrays the true expectation of an intellectual. Professor Batey represents the African intelligentsia. Batey is a representation of the myopic African intellectuals whose researches do not get to the root of societal problems. Professor Batey could not present the true picture of events. In his address to Kamini which drums support for Kamini's dictatorial tendency, she states:

Your Excellency, it was my duty a scholar to present the truth. 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. (p. 23)

The height of ridicule was brought upon the academic community when Kamini ordered that a young academic be promoted to the position of the First Secretary and be awarded Professorship upon return to Bugara because he writes the President's speech.

I promote that young man, today. When he come back to Bugara, see that he go to university and make him professor. But if he try to be brilliant like Kiwawa, he will smell his mother's cunt before he can run away. (p. 15)

The brutality is enormous. For instance, Gunema killed a captain in the Palace Brigade of Guards because he had a dream that the Captain planned a coup.

GUNEMA (nodding). El Colonel Aranja, my late capitan of the Palace Brigade of Guards, it happen like that with him. One day he come my house as my family finish... yes, I remember, we eat paella that afternoon. We finish eating, he enter the dining room unceremoniously, over urgent matter. We talk, I watch him. That very night, I dream he plan coup d'etat against me. I arrest him in the morning and the tribunal find him guilty. I give him firing squad. (p. 37)

The support the government of Kamini got from Gudrum and Professor Batey goes a long way in establishing the tyranny of Kamini.

## 5. Satirical Devices in Soyinka's 'A Play of Giants'

Irony is an instrument of artistic empowerment deployed by Soyinka to highlight the folly of the four giants in the play in order to mock them. With the use of irony, the opposite of an intended meaning can be expressed to imply condemnation of an action. Irony is effectively deployed in *A Play of Giants*, the purpose being to further heighten the use of satire.

The title, *A Play of Giants* is quite ironic and highly satirical. Literarily, giants are people whose height, stature,

has been blown out of proportion biologically. Thus the title suggests that there is a meeting of these giants. Connotatively, however, the giants in the play are the despots – Kamini, Kasco, Gunema and Toboum. These characters are ironically presented as giants but are the opposite when their roles are examined. They are intellectually, politically and ideologically dwarfish in that they do not seem to understand the full import of their leadership role. Their major concern is only to retain power and deal ruthlessly with anyone who opposes them. Their characterization is a betrayal of their performances and roles in the play when examined from the title of the play. The characteristics of a giant would be that of security, strength, foresight and safety. The giants in the play are however unable to live up to the leadership roles they forcefully ascribe to themselves. It is therefore ironic to refer to these despot leaders as giants when they are dwarfed in ideas and reasoning.

The 'Giants' are also disillusioned about their status as they hold a jaundiced view of themselves. At the start of the play, Gunema was decrying the activities of those who engage in guerilla warfare in his country. This is because he thinks he and his co-despot are naturally endowed to lead even when it is obvious that they lack the qualities to be called leaders. He refers to his co-despots:

...we who are gifted naturally with leadership, after a while, we cease to govern, to lead: we -exist, I think, in a rare space which is - power. Es 'erdad, no? (p. 2)

Gunema assumes that they are not ordinary. Soyinka presents the African leaders of this time as people who through self-deceit have assumed the position of a demigod. This justifies his actions and that of others as being myopic when the play develops. What is witnessed in the play is a mockery of those who call themselves leaders but lack the attributes of a leader. This is why Gunema says:

...Like me and our camarade the Emperor Kasco, we are not ordinaria. Why you think we rule our people? Some people are born to power. Others are - cattle. They need ring in their nose for us to lead. (p. 11)

It is quite ironic that when the Secretary-General of the United Nations requested that each country is expected to present a work of art representative of their culture, Kamini and other African despots mistook his idea and the plan to present their statues. To show how inept Kamini is of governance, he believes that he controls the economic affairs and he can curb stealing when he travels with the Chairman of Bugara Central Bank.

KAMINI....You excuse me while I talk some business. Is my chairman of Bugara Central Bank. When I travel, I take Bank of Bugara with me, then nobody can steal money behind Kamini's back. Too many kondo wearing European coat and tie and forging signature of this and that bank manager. When Kamini not home, only chairman can sign cheque, and he here with Kamini. (p. 4)

Soyinka also employs wit and humour to expose the characters' flaws and limitations. Harris [6] in his conception of what satire entails notes that satire 'blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that human

institutions or humanity may be improved'. This establishes wit as a specific feature of satire. The intention of wit in an expression may be to produce a shock or comic surprise. Humour refers to what is purely comic, it evokes as it is sometimes said, sympathetic laughter or else laughter which is an end in itself. *A Play of Giants* is humorous and at the same time witty. The characters speak in a serious way but the speech is so humorous that it evokes sympathetic laughter in the reader or audience. Kamini is a very humorous character. His inability to express himself in grammatically correct English is in itself humorous.

Also, he constantly refers to himself as 'Life-President', 'El-Haji, Kamini' with a lot of titles from universities around the world. Whenever he is not properly addressed, he does not hesitate to correct. When he is called Mr. President he quickly corrects by saying... 'Dr. Life President' or 'Dr. President' or 'Field Marshal El Hajj'. When he is not satisfied with the attitude of the sculptor, he reminds the sculptor of who he is:

You think Kamini belong in Chamber of Horrors, not so? Not very good thing to say about Life President the Field-Marshal El-Haji, Dr Kamini, DSO, VC LD, PhD, DSc and so on and so for from universities all over the world. (p. 32)

The playwright also employs symbolism as a means of satirizing the so-called 'Giants' in *A Play of Giants*. Symbolism stands or represents something, especially material things taken to represent immaterial or an abstract thing taken for an idea or quality, or a written character conventionally standing for an object, a process and so on. Soyinka exposes their moral, intellectual and political aridity. An instance of this is Kamini's attitude when going to answer the call of nature. Soyinka describes the entire process thus:

Kamini has taken off his jacket. He lays it very carefully over the back of his chair. He unbuckles his belt and moves towards his trousers then his bulk unto the toilet seat, remaining visible from the waist –up through the door (p. 32).

This scene is symbolic. Kamini's display of his nakedness in the full glare of the public symbolises him as an animal and also a child who is not ashamed of being seen naked. This was when he was about to punish the sculptor for saying Kamini's statue belongs to the Chamber of Horrors. It became obvious that the sculptor will not be able to complete the statue he is making for the Heads of state, he informs Kamini and tells him he may not understand the reasons why the because he is a layman.

Another symbol used to express his childishness – a child in the guise of a fully grown man, is the presentation of Babushka doll to Kamini by the Russians. The Russians visit his embassy to negotiate the possibility of exhibiting the statutes of Kamini and his 'brother-despots' but make it clear that the exhibition of the statue of their national hero will precede those of Kamini and his brothers. Kamini is then presented with a Babushka doll by the Russians as a mark of their solidarity to his government. Presenting him with a doll symbolises him as a child and it also shows him as an ignorant character who does not understand the language of diplomacy. This symbol is highly satirical as it presents

Kaminias physically big but intellectually, still a child

The play ends on the note of chaos with the news that the government of Kamini has been toppled. However, it is not clear if the new government is another dictator in waiting because it is not clear if the change arose out of people's genuine struggle. For this, Ngugi [8] holds that 'it is not enough for the African artist, standing aloof, to view society and highlight its weaknesses. He must try to go beyond this, to seek out the sources, the causes and the trends of a revolutionary struggle'. Notwithstanding this view, Soyinka has been able to clearly satirise the society's anomalies by directly criticizing repressive governments in Africa.

## 6. Conclusion

*A Play of Giants* is significant in the way it explores the contemporary problems of tyranny and abuse of power, hypocrisy and decadence in religion and the excessive madness for materialism in the modern society. Soyinka makes no serious attempt to hide the real characters who serve as models for the play. They are four of the most ruthless despots in the history of African Politics. Despite their ruthlessness, the playwright artfully presents them as hollow, empty and completely ignorant of the political, socio-economic events in the countries which they claim to govern.

African society is the target of Soyinka's satire. With this, Soyinka raises the question of leadership in African nations. He was very direct in his critique of the African situation. Through the use of satire, he exposes the illiteracy and lack of exposure of African leaders. Despite being the political head expected to provide focused leadership to their countries, the ignorance of the rulers are exposed. Soyinka points attention to the fact that citizens also contribute to the building of political monsters that characterize most African nation-states through sycophancy. Soyinka in *A Play of Giants* mirrors the society by showing the irregularities and the socio-political and economic problems prevalent in many Africa countries. The play cannot just be considered as a satire of the past. The play is still relevant in the contemporary era since most African nation-states still suffer from democratic dictators.

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