

## LAUGHTER IN THE THEATRE: A STUDY OF SOYINKA'S *THE LION AND THE JEWEL* AND *A PLAY OF GIANTS*

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at how Soyinka has used satire, a literary manner which blends critical attitude with humour to condemn some oddities in the Nigerian society in particular and the African society in general.

Two of Soyinka's texts are used for the discourse. They are: *The Lion and the Jewel* and *A Play of Giants*. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, the paper looks at Soyinka's criticism and ridicule of what obtains in the contemporary Nigerian society where some educated ones reject their culture in order to be highly esteemed in society as 'civilized' beings.

This, Soyinka feels, can lead to failure as some of these people have a confused idea of what civilization actually means. Also, in *A Play of Giants*, Soyinka satirises the issues of oppression and dictatorship which have been the bane of Nigeria and other African countries. This is exemplified through some despots that have emerged at one time or the other in the African continent. With the fall of these dictators at the end of the play, Soyinka is predicting the ultimate fall of any dictator, be it in Nigeria or any part of Africa.

### **Introduction**

Wole Soyinka, a poet, a novelist, a social critic, a wine connoisseur, a politician and foremost a playwright, was born in 1934. He had his early education in Abeokuta. He had his post-primary education at Government College, Ibadan between 1946 and 1950. He had his university education at the University College, Ibadan and Leeds University between 1951 and 1958. He worked at the Royal Court theatre in London before returning to Nigeria in 1960. On his return to Nigeria, he joined the University of Ibadan and later the University of Ife where he became a Professor of Comparative Literature.

For his social crusade, he had at one time or the other been put behind bars. One of these instances was during the Nigerian Civil war when he was jailed by the Gowon regime for visiting Biafra. In 1986, Wole Soyinka became the first African to win the Nobel prize for literature. During the dark days of the Abacha junta in Nigeria, he joined in fighting against the dictator by joining the National Democratic Coalition (NADBCO) and he was instrumental to the establishment of the Radio Kudirat that was a thorn in the flesh of the regime.

At present, he is one of those in the forefront of good governance in the country. This, he sees as one of the things that a writer should do for his people - a writer should be in the forefront of the social, political and economic emancipation of the people.

Despite his role as a social crusader, he is foremost a playwright. According to Ogunba 1975: 11), "the real significance of Soyinka, is however, that he is a great pioneer of modern West African drama of English expression.

When he started writing plays in the 1950's, there was hardly anything one could call a major play in Nigeria, or for that matter in English speaking West Africa." Some of his published plays are: *The Swamp Dwellers* (1963), *A Dance of the Forest* (1963), *The Strong Breed* (1964), *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), *The Road* (1965), *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), *Madmen and Specialists* (1973), *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1973), *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973), *Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), *A Play of Giants* (1984), *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995). He has also written many poems and collection of essays.

In most of Soyinka's plays, satire has been a weapon through which he creates laughter in the theatre. Thrall (1960: 436), sees satire as 'a literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved. The true satirist is conscious of the frailty of institutions of man's devising and attempts through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling while Goring (2001), sees satire as:

A mode that combines criticism with comic ridicule. Often light and witty, it is nonetheless undertaken with a serious purpose to publicize and to rebuke hypocrisy; immorality and wrong-doing in order to improve conduct. It is a type of protest, but also a form of correction which pre-supposes the existence of a shared set of values by which an individual or institution can be judged. Such accounts of misbehaviour can also be used to support the reader or listener's sense of the necessity of proper behaviour (293 -294).

Goring goes further to list three types of satire. The Horatian satire, which is named after the Roman poet Horace, characteristically exposes human folly while also understanding its inevitability. Rather than naming specific individuals, Horatian satire tends to focus on recognizable types, the glutton or lecher, for example. It is therefore milder and more tolerant. Juvenal satire, named after the Roman writer, Juvenal, is more indignant and criticizes historical individuals, either naming them directly or presenting them as fictional characters with recognizable physical or verbal attributes. Mennipean satire (sometimes referred to as Varonian satire) is named after the Greek cynic philosopher of the third century B.C, it often involves a humorous overview of contemporary intellectual and philosophical topics.

More than any African playwright, Soyinka has explored the use of satire in highlighting the various problems confronting the contemporary African society. According to Adeoti and Elegbeleye (2005:305), "Soyinka, has audibly articulated in his satiric plays . . . standard responses to and means of coping with stress - inducing quotidian realities. He consistently draws attention to perceived inadequacies of the society, fusing the sober and the humorous, the grim and the milly".

"This paper attempts to look at how Soyinka creates laughter in the theatre through the use of satire. This will be illustrated through two of his plays: *The Lion and the Jewel* and *A Play of Giants*.

**Satire in *the Lion and the Jewel***

*The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), shows the conflict between the Western culture and the traditional way of life. By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the influence of Western education has begun to be felt in Nigeria as the country now has a new breed of men with a different social and cultural orientation. Thus, the stage is set for a clash between these new breed of men and the traditionalists. This is what Soyinka seeks to explore in the play.

Lakunle, the twenty-three year old school - teacher and Bale Baroka, the traditional head of the village of Ilujinle are the two combatants in the play while Sidi, an illiterate village beauty becomes a central figure in the conflict. Lakunle wants to marry Sidi. While Sidi too is well disposed to marrying Lakunle, she expects him to marry her in the proper traditional way by paying her bride price but the forward looking Lakunle will never hear of this. He describes bride price as:

A savage custom, barbaric, out-dated,  
Rejected, denounced, accursed,  
Excommunicated, archaic, degrading,  
Humiliating, unspeakable, redundant.  
Retrogressive, remarkable, unpalatable (7).

Sidi is astonished at this Lakunle's outburst. The most she could do is to ask if the bag is empty. The reply of Lakunle shows his complete rejection of what the traditional custom is. This is seen to be as a result of what he has 'learnt in his book'.

Apart from this area of disagreement with Sidi, Lakunle dislikes Baroka, the Baale of Ilujinle who represents the tradition of the people. To Lakunle, Baroka is cunning, self-centered and a clog in the wheel of progress of Ilujinle. As for Baroka, he does not see Lakunle as much as an enemy. Baroka, as portrayed by Soyinka, is not shown to be very bad rather, Soyinka sees Lakunle as an impatient, self-opinionated young man who does not have a good grasp of what he stands for. Jones (1975), describes Lakunle as "a middle-headed sloganeering . . . man of unformed values" (24).

Lakunle's preachings to the village people makes him a caricature - thus, he is called the madman of Ilujinle. Soyinka's portrayal of what Lakunle stands for and his idea of civilization can be seen in this speech:

And bring the city ways to us.  
We'll buy saucepans for all the  
women Clay pots are crude and  
unhygienic No man shall take more  
wives than one That's why they're  
impotent too soon.  
The ruler shall ride cars, not horses

Or a bicycle at the very least.  
We'll Burn the forest, cut the trees  
Then plant a modern park for lovers  
We'll print newspaper everyday  
With pictures of seductive girls.  
The world will judge our progress  
by The girls that win beauty  
contests.  
While Lagos builds new factories  
daily We only play 'ayo' and gossip.

Where is our school Ballroom dancing?  
 Who here can throw a cocktail party?  
 We must be modern with the rest Or  
 live forgotten by the world We must  
 reject the pauu wine habit.  
 And take to tea, with milk and sugar (36            37).

This shows that the mind of Lakunle is that of a confused Nigerian whose mind has become taken over by the western culture. Lakunle wants to remove the 'primitive' and 'barbarous' African ideas from his mind and in the process, he becomes confused. "If progress is represented by Lakunle's vapid description of it, then it can be said without hesitation that the village of Ilujinle would be better off without it" (Jones, 1975:28).

As the play progresses, Baroka also wants the hand of Sidi who had become popular due to her picture that was published on the cover of a magazine. Apart from Baroka's polygamist nature, the move is to thwart the effort of Lakunle. He succeeds in bringing Sidi to his side through the use of the wisdom that has to do with his age. He sells Sidi the dummy that he is impotent. When Sidi goes to him, instead of worshiping Sidi the way Lakunle does, he proves to her that he is a man. Instead of preaching some future fantasies in some kind of fairy - land, Baroka preaches something concrete by showing a gullible Sidi a machine, which he claims he will use in making stamps that will bear Sidi's picture. Thus, Sidi now feels free with Baroka and she becomes yet another victim of Baroka's amorous life.

Though after this, Lakunle still wants to marry Sidi, she would not have anything to do with him, for he has disappointed her - he does not have the substance to back up what he preaches. He could have been the best choice for her but he lacks the manliness of Baroka hence she tells him:

Out of my way, book-nourished shrimp.  
 Do you see what strength he has given me?  
 That was not bad. For a man of sixty,  
 It was the secret of God's own  
 draught A deed for drums and  
 ballads.  
 But you, at sixty, you'll be ten years dead!  
 In fact, you'll not survive your honeymoon . . .(63 - 64).

At the end, Lakunle is shown to be a totally confused man who does not believe in his own preaching as he starts wondering if he is not a fool for wanting to marry Sidi when she has already been disvirgined by Baroka:

In projecting his distate for Lakunle and what he represents, Soyinka makes use of some satiric humour in ridiculing him. An instance can be seen when Lakunle greets Baroka 'Good morning sir!' and Baroka replies:

Guru niorin guru morin, ngh - hn! That is All  
 we get from 'alakowe'. You call at his house  
 Hoping he sends for beer, but all you get is  
 Guru morin. Will guru morin wet my throat?  
 (16).

This reply of Baroka to Lakunle's greeting is Soyinka's way of ridiculing the western culture as represented by Lakunle. Soyinka's intent at ridiculing the oddities in his society is aptly summarized in Ogunba (1975), comment on the tragic - comic synthesis in Soyinka's drama when he asserts that:

When he is in his lighter mood and makes us laugh  
at the absurdities of certain characters - their  
pettiness, egotism, and little crimes - our laughter  
is not always simple gaiety. Halfway through,  
the laughter suddenly dries up and we are face - to -  
face with a human situation moving rapidly towards catastrophe (5-6).

Jones (1973), also, seems to summarise Soyinka's intent in his satire when he asserts that:

Soyinka sees society as being in continual need of salvation from itself. This act of salvation is not a mass act; it comes about through the vision and dedication of individuals who doggedly pursue their vision in spite of the opposition of the very society they seek to save. They frequently end up as the victims of the society which benefits from their vision. The salvation of the society then depends on the exercise of the individual will (11).

Thus, Soyinka has used what obtains in contemporary Nigeria where educated ones reject their native culture in order to be highly esteemed in society as a thing that can lead to failure as is the case with Lakunle. This is one of the reasons why he is rejected at the end of the play. Sidi rejects him not only because of the refusal to pay the bride price but also because he is a book-worm rather than a real man. A man who is ready to practice what his book teaches without looking at the appropriateness.

### **Satire in *A Play of Giants***

In *A Play of Giants*, Soyinka seeks to satirise some despots that have emerged in Africa and the hypocrisy inherent in international relations. In the note introducing the play, he says:

No serious effort is made here to hide the identities of the real life actors who have served as models for *A play of Giants*. They are non

other than: President for Life Macias Nguema (late) of Equatorial Guinea, Emperor for Life (ex) Jean-Baptiste Bokassa of the Central African Republic; Life President Mobutu Sese Seko, etc., of Congo Kinshasha and the HERO OF HEROES in the person of Life President (ex) the Field Marshal El-Haji Dr. Idi Amin of Uganda, DSC, DSO, VC, etc. (v).

The setting of the play is the Bugarian Embassy overlooking the UN headquarters in New York. In response to a request by the UN Secretary, general for a bust of the president of each member state, three of the African leaders - Nguema (Nguema), Kasco (Bokassa) and Kamini (Idi Amin) are seating for a Sculptor working on a life size group sculpture of 'the three crowned heads'. This is to be placed on the top stair of the passage in the UN building.

Through the discussion of these leaders, one gets a working of their inner minds. To Gunema, the 'subversive elements' in their different nations are propelled by lust for power: "Ah, elpoder, amigos, to seek the truth of the matter, these subversive, guerilleros they do not really seek to rule, no, not to administer a space, not to govern a pueblo comprendo? No, mostly they seek power. Simply power. (1).

As for Kamini, he believes all subversive elements, who he prefers to call 'Kondos' should be killed and if they are not caught, so far their names are known, their villages can be razed down and their family destroyed. In the words of Adekoya (2003) "Soyinka depicts Kamini as a psychopath. The Bugarian leader is portrayed more as an exemplification of the fallen human nature . . . Kamini not only represents absolute power, he also proves by his actions that it is highly contaminative (294).

Soyinka tries to show right from the start of the play that some of these leaders have become the monsters they are because of the hypocrisy of the West. This is exemplified in Gudrum, a Scandinavian lady who exhorts these leaders and never sees anything wrong with them so far her own interest is satisfied. She is even said to be writing a book on Kamini. According to Kamini:

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).

These African leaders are shown to be debased and morally bankrupt. They are easily excited when sexual topics are mentioned. In their hey-days, many of them kept a harem of wives and concubines. According to Kamini, "... is good a leader should have many wives" (4).

One of the fundamental belief of these despots is that power should not be shared with anyone. According to Kasco, it is the division and debasement of power that led to the fall of Robespierre in France. To him, "Power is indivisible" (4). To Gunema, voodoo is the best form of power, for it can easily be used in possessing and controlling others.

The illiteracy and educational backwardness of these leaders is also revealed in the way Kamini takes along the chairman of the Bank of Bugara to the UN so that no one can steal Bugara's money when he is not in the country. He had sent the Chairman to the World Bank for a loan but the World Bank insists that giving the loan is to be tied to the funding of specific projects. When Kamini hears this, he Hares up. He accuses the super powers, the World Bank and the IMF of 'economic sabotage' (5) and that the policy of using the meager resources of poor nations to service debts is to make them poorer. He then orders the chairman to:

... get back to Bugara right away and start printing more Bugara bank notes. I show the bastards at least they can't control. Bugara sovereign currency (6).

When the Chairman tries to explain that the national currency is at present not worth more than 'its size in toilet paper', Kamini orders his detention. He tells the Task Forces special man:

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 (8).

Kamini's poor understanding of simple economics is ironical as well as laughable for a man who claims to hold academic achievements like DSC, VCLD, PhD, etc. These dictators have their role model in historical despots like Papa Doc Duvalier, the one time voodoo ruler of Haiti. Kamini even traces his descent to Chaka Zulu.

The people's discontentment with the leaders' style of leadership shows in the defection of the delegates that Kamini came with. Kamini will not allow their defection to lie low. He orders for a call to be made to the Presidential Task Special, to dispatch their men to go and terrorise the villages of the defectors.

Some of these countries are so poor that they owe a lot of debt. An example is Bugara which is portrayed as such a poor country that she can not even pay the phone bill of her embassy nor afford money to pay the salary of a first and second secretary.

These dictators are later joined by 'Life President Barra Tuboum' who has just survived an insurrection. He is dressed in a stripped animal skin. He announces that he has abandoned all foreign clothes and names and is now to be known as "Bara Bourn Tuboum Gbazo Tse Khoro diDzo". This his nationalistic stance is laughable as he depended on the French and the Belgians for support in crushing the said rebellion. "No one who depends on others, and lacks resources of his own," Rousseau, ns cited in Hoffman and Fidler (1991:141 -14 2), argues, "can ever be free".

Apart from Gunema, the others are shown to have seized power through coup - d'etats. According to Toboum, 'coup attempts are as common as floods or drought on the continent. . . .' To Adekoya (2005), "the prevalence of coup attempts in Africa is incontrovertible proof of instability of the political systems operated on the continent and (he reality of the unsettled values after European colonization" (293).

Kamini, is portrayed as the worst of the leaders. Perhaps due to the low level of his education, he does not know much about international relations. If not, he would not have manhandled the sculptor for saying that the sculpture of the three leaders cannot be ready for exhibition at the UN. When the IJN Secretary General comes to visit, Kamini's lies and distortion of truth becomes manifest. He tells the Secretary General:

Oh him? I know he took like something from the Chamber of Horrors He falls of a ladder. I think No serious accident. We take good care of him... (40).

For his pessimism as to the finishing of the sculpture, the sculptor is called different types of names. He is even said to be a spy. This is the way African dictators behave when things do not go their way.

As for Kamini's speech which is now handled by Professor Batey, one of the African-American supporters of Kamini, he mentions the need for the total liberation of apartheid South Africa. This revolutionary stance of Kamini endears him to most African-Americans because they feel he is protecting the black race from Western exploitation. Kamini's uuscriousness and lunacy is seen in his description of the mock battle he had with South Africa:

KAMIN1! Oh yes, Oh yes. You still remember the famous air,

land and sea military exercise I make to demonstrate how I will defeat South Africa. I invite all embassies. It was serious mock battle I tell you. It make Voster shit in his pants (42).

Many of these dictators are sustained due to the interest of western nations and ideologies. Though many of these countries know the atrocities committed by these despots, they close their eyes due to their interests. An instance can be seen in the case of Kamini who is sustained by the Russians after the United States and Britain stopped their support. In the altercation between Prof. Batey and the Russian diplomats, one can get a glimpse of this:

BATEY: ... Isn't this interesting? You sustain this man in power for years with (he most sophisticated weaponry. You train his secret service and condone the so-called acts of suppression against his own people. Yet in your heart of hearts, you despise him.

2ND RUSSIAN: Yes. A common butcher. We knew him. We had close studies of him sent regularly by our own men, not just Western reports.

But in any case, we did not create him - the British did. They sustained him in power, backed by the Americans. Then they disagreed. The pupil had more than mastered the game of his masters. So, we stepped in to fill the vacuum. I admitted to you Mr. Professor, we are pragmatists. Our policy in that part of the continent required his retention in power. But you sir, what about you? (54-55).

Despite how dangerous and depraved Kamini is, he tries to paint himself as a patriot with the way he sent out the Neo-colonialist British, Americans and Russians from his country. This action, Adekoya (2005), describes as what could be "likened to a poison that is both curative and destructive (288). He goes further to cite Nietzsche that good could reside in evil:

Even the most harmful man may really be the most useful when it comes to the preservation of the species; for he nurtures either in himself or in others, through his effects, instincts without which humanity would long have become feeble or rotten. Hatred, the mischievous delight in the misfortunes of others, the lust to rob and dominate, and whatever else is called evil belongs to the most amazing economy of the preservation of the species. To be sure, this economy is not afraid of high prices, of squandering, and it is on the whole extremely foolish. Still it is *proven* that it has preserved our race so far.  
(73).

Kamini criticizes the hypocrisy of the super powers on issues concerning the weak nations: He tells the US Delegate: "When you call conference and everybody is making talk, at conference tables, you are undermining talk and giving weapon to all sides. When you are making disarmament talk, you are making more and more atom bomb" (62). This Kamini's criticism aptly capture the hypocrisy of US and Britain who possess nuclear weapons but will always attack nations like

Iraq, Iran, North Korea, etc. for having the same weapon of mass destruction.

At the end, the inevitable that must always happen to despots take place. There is a coup d'état in Bugara. The other despots become afraid that it might be infectious; it might take place in their own country too. As a precaution against this, according to Gunerna, "me I lock up possible before I leave the country. Plus their family in case of very bad suspicion" (51).

Kamini believes that there can be no coup anywhere without the aid of the super powers: According to Kamini:

...I know there is no coup in the world which is not back by superpower. Ha. How I know? Of course the British and American help me make my coup (66).

Kamini then decides to hold the Russian diplomats, the American diplomat and the Secretary General of the UN hostage. He tells them:

You send urgent message to you government, you tell them to undo their coup send International Force to Bugara to crush rebellion other wise you don't get out of here alive. Nobody get out of here alive. I have wired everywhere with bomb.... You Mr. Civil Servant, you will write to World Bank to bring Bugara Loan here in cash. Then write General Assembly to pass motion condemning the coup...(67- 68).

As this is going on, the Bugarian refugees in New York come to stage a demonstration outside the embassy, carrying placards like: BUGARIAN EXILES

FOR TOTAL LIBERATION. Kamini orders his guards to shoot at the demonstrators as they become violent. He makes use of grenades, submarine guns and a rocket launcher to attack the adjoining UN building. As this is going on, the remaining despots, who are shown to be lily-livered, scamper for safety under chairs.

Thus, Soyinka is able to bring to fore some of the African dictators who are no more than demented and insane beings. They are shown to be political anti-heroes; they are not giants. What Soyinka does in *A Play of Giants* tallies with belief of Sigmund Freud, as cited by (Elliot, 1960:264) that, "by belittling and humbling our enemy, by scorning and ridiculing him, we indirectly obtain the pleasure of his defeat by the laughter of the third person".

*A Play of Giants* can be seen therefore as providing Soyinka with the material for his continued revolt against oppression and dictatorship, be it in Nigeria or Uganda. This quest tallies with the view of Orwell (1957), that the artist always has a desire to push the world in a certain direction ... to alter other people's idea of the type of society that they should strive after (316); This quest also tallies with Ngugi's belief that:

Gorki has shown the way. Art should encourage people to bolder and higher resolves in all their struggle to free the human spirit from the twin manacle of oppressive nature and oppressive man (1981:22).

The final fall of Kamini is "all part of Soyinka's articulation of his fight for the liberation of the oppressed in society" (Asaolu, 1990:90). The fall of Kamini is a good lesson to dictators in Nigeria and in Africa in general that power belongs to the people hence leaders should learn to be servants of the people.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that Soyinka is a man who usually has an important message to deliver to the society through his major vehicle - satire. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, the paper shows how he condemns some educated Nigerians who have a warped idea of what civilization is all about and at the end turn themselves into caricatures. He posits that this is an ill that should be done away with.

In *A Play of Giants*, through the portrayal of the despots satirized in the play as political antiheroes and not giants, Soyinka ridicules all despots that have emerged in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. He also predicts the ultimate (all of any dictator, be it military or civilian in form).

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