PSYCHOPATHS IN POWER: THE COLLAPSE OF THE AFRICAN DREAM IN *A PLAY OF GIANTS*

Olusegun Adekoya  
Department of English  
Obafemi Awolowo University  
Ile-Ife  
Nigeria  
oadekoya2@yahoo.com

AN ABSTRACT

A critical investigation of Wole Soyinka’s *A Play of Giants*, the paper discusses what the playwright himself calls the Aminian theme, that is, African leaders’ obsession with power, a seductive drive that breeds moral corruption, dictatorship, delusions, economic distortions and ruination, megalomania, perversion and desecration of all that is good in African traditions, and the evaporation of all the dreams of greatness, of nationalism, liberation from colonial thraldom, disease, ignorance and poverty, and of pan-Africanism nursed in the heady days of Independence celebrations. The four despots caricatured in the play are 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, now the Democratic Republic of Congo).

They are in New York to attend the General Assembly of the United Nations. In response to the Secretary-General’s request for a work of art representative of each member nation’s culture, say, a miniaturized bust of the president, they sit for a life-size group sculpture on Kamini’s suggestion and in what appears to be a vivid demonstration of the old African spirit of communalism but which, as events later show, is its outright bastardization. While seated, they engage in grim banter on the nature and dynamics of power, its privileges and trappings which they want kept sacrosanct, its various characteristics, and its specific manifestations in the countries over which they rule with a rod of iron. There is a hidden struggle for power discernible in the tyrants’ long conversation.

Using satirical devices of burlesque and the grotesque, Soyinka portrays the four despots, who ironically see themselves as geniuses and specialists on the deployment and management of power in the control of masses of people, as buffoons and psychopaths. Their actions, thoughts and expressions in the play truly depict them as morons and madmen for whom human life means nothing other than material on which to practise endurance tests and experiment on power. The worst sadist of all is Kamini who proves in the end to be the most ruthless strategist, the cleverest manipulator of people and situations, and the indisputable winner of the muted contest, for he not only subjects the
other African heads of states to his control and commands as the drama draws to a close but also keeps two American Delegates and two Russian Delegates hostage in the Bugaran Embassy which is only a stone’s throw from the United Nations Building, and launches a barrage of military attacks on the building in an attempt to raze it.

Although in real life the four giants have been removed from office and divested of power either forcibly and ignominiously by rebels or naturally by the inexorable force of senescence and death, the ravages of their misrule and profligacy are still felt by the beleaguered peoples of their respective countries, as the economies remain in the doldrums and ethnic conflicts generated by suspicion of political marginalization and military coups continue to cause confusion and social upheaval and destabilize the polity. Thus *A Play of Giants* is still of immediate sociopolitical relevance to Black Africa. Besides, some of the countries are still struggling to throw off the yoke of military dictatorship and establish democratic rule, while others already on the path of democracy are yet to assimilate its principles and live the culture.

In discussing the theme, the essay examines such elements of drama as setting, plot, action, character and language which are used by the author to elicit the sordid penetralia of despotism on the African political landscape. All the problems that afflict the modern-day African society are technically projected onto the life-size group sculpture, a symbolic icon that represents horror and obscenity. Replicated by Sculptor's body swathed in bandages, the sculpture is interpreted as the play: an awe-inducing spectacle. Dramaturgic devices employed by the playwright to signify the horrors of despotism are discussed.

Even though power is represented in the play as monolithic and indivisible, a recondite force that brooks no opposition, it takes various forms and the essay identifies and comments on its diverse manifestations, such as economic power, language or rhetorical power, military power, political power, secret power (enjoyed by terrorists), sexual power, witchcraft or mystical power (voodoo), and technological power which is used by its proud possessors to tyrannize the powerless Third World countries. A negation of politics, real power in the play transcends the petty bickerings and schematic intrigues of politicians and puts its possessor in a special realm that beggars God’s own heavenly abode. Whereas God occasionally leaves His throne, comes down to earth, and condescends to reason with people, the giants never part from the ambience of grandeur and power. Rather, they banish thought altogether, a proscription that reduces all other creatures to obsequious subjects robbed of will and unthinking toads. Their love of grandiloquent titles and self-aggrandizement, alas, betrays their internal hollowness and weakness. They are all straw men: cretins! Soyinka cuts the megalomaniacs down to size. Far from being an abstraction, power is rendered visible in the drama, made visceral, savoured with relish, thoroughly digested and excreted with gusto. It reeks of cannibalism; and truly, the giants prey pitilessly on Black Africa and leave it empty of substance.

Economic and human costs of power sadism are huge. Among its evil effects inscribed in the play and highlighted in the essay are cynicism, dehumanization of both
the practitioners and their victims, fear and abulia in both parties, death on a massive scale arising from bloody conflicts caused by divide-and-rule politics, increase in domestic and organized crimes, economic disasters, political disorder, social anomie, institutionalization of corruption, militarization of civilian population, vulgarization of traditional ethic, erosion of communal and family values, spiritual atrophy, despoliation of the environment, collapse of industries, capital flight, brain drain, and other syndromes of underdevelopment. The people’s collective psyche is wrenched, their labour is laid waste, and the nation increasingly sinks in the mire of economic dependence. The overall effect is despair, disgust and stupor bred by shock: the appalling state in which most African countries currently find themselves.

Given the egregious damage done by European imperialists, slavers and colonialists and their African collaborators and successors to the polity, advocates of African Renaissance still have a long time to wait for the mucky stable to be cleaned to pave the way for Black Africa to come into its own. The tragedy of the Dark Continent, as portrayed in the play, continues unabated as the productive energies of the land are organized toward meeting the needs of the centres of power in the world, while the suffering of its peoples remains unrelieved.

Soyinka represents the conspiracy and the despicable role played by super-powers in deepening the crises of Africa’s underdevelopment in the drama. They not only prop up unpopular regimes and use them to satisfy their own politicoeconomic interests, they stir up conflicts on the continent and sell arms to warring parties, thereby profiting from other nations’ misery and woes. Both the capitalist West and the socialist East engaged in Cold War politics are indicted by the playwright for their duplicity and brutal amoral conception of international relations and for using African leaders as mere pawns on the race-riddled chessboard of world economy and world politics. The language of diplomacy is exposed as replete with deceit and tergiversation.

Equally censured are the Black Caucuses in the United States (represented in the play by Mayor of Hyacombe and Professor Batey) who were taken in by Idi Amin’s droll antics, symbolic gestures, and manic tantrums directed at the plague of white racism, saw him as a misunderstood heroic Black revolutionary who was out to talk back and take vengeance on Europe and America for the TransAtlantic Slave Trade and the colonial conquest, and so lauded his oppressive regime and gave it their unalloyed support. Their emotional attachment to Africa as the source of their cultural and racial identity prevents an objective assessment of the land and its people. It makes it difficult for them to see the blights of precolonial Africa and the atrocities being perpetrated by its present demented rulers. The part played by foreign propagandists in the emergence of the African dictators and their retention in power is highlighted. Kamini’s female European adorers, pathetic victims of the myth of Black hypersexuality, who are fixated on his giant physique and celebrated sexual prowess, do not escape the playwright’s satirical barbs.

Awful and terrifying, the cataclysmic ending of the play is interpreted as an apocalyptic vision, specifically as the playwright’s prophetic reading of human history as
inexorably bound for a nuclear destruction, all because of the mad struggle for power and the desire to have control over other people’s lives, the resources of the world, and its markets. Soyinka proffers the solution of creativity, such as Sculptor engages in while the possessed maniac Kamini and his human engines of wrath and aggression destroy the fruit of long years of toil: culture.

A caustic satire on despotism and abuse of power and a lasting testament to the horror of the wound inflicted on Africa by foreign and local power psychopaths, *A Play of Giants* is a bold affirmation of the resilience of the human spirit, the undying will to freedom, and an expression of the unflagging commitment to beauty, criticism and truth. Its humour is murky and morbid; the giants’ gestures are grand, grotesque and outlandish; their language is stilted and riddled with obscenities, and their manner is ludicrous and stiff. Everything about the monsters is unnatural. The play suggests that the traditional relatively harmonious world built by Black Africans has crashed and the new one that is being constructed to replace it is not only strange and incomprehensible but also has lost its moorings right from the foundation level. Soyinka perceives the lack of responsible leadership as the bane of politics in Black Africa. A variety of critical approaches – Formalism, New Criticism, Marxism, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Structuralism, and Deconstruction and a pot-pourri of Postcolonialist and Postmodernist literary theories – is adopted in explicating the text.