

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

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**PSYCHOPATHS IN POWER: THE COLLAPSE OF THE AFRICAN DREAM IN  
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A critical investigation of Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*, the present paper discusses what the playwright himself calls the "Aminian theme"<sup>1</sup>, 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. The problem leads to the evaporation of all dreams of greatness, nationalism, liberation from colonial thralldom, 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).

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 socio-political 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 road of democracy are yet to assimilate its principles and live the culture.

In discussing the topic, the essay examines such elements of drama as setting, plot, action, character and language which are used by the playwright to elicit the sordid penitralia of despotism on the African political landscape. Dramaturgic devices employed by the author to signify the horrors of despotism are highlighted and discussed. A variety of critical approaches – Formalism, Marxism, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Deconstruction – is adopted in explicating the text.

The giants are in New York to attend the General Assembly of the United Nations. In response to the request of the organization's Secretary-General for a representative work of art from each member nation, 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. In reality, the suggestion stems from Kamini's megalomania. 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.

*A Play of Giants* is set in the Bugaran Embassy in New York City. Its balcony adorned with framed portraits, its gold-gilt railing, and the heavy throne-like chairs in which the giants sit for Sculptor reek of grandeur, opulence and power and simultaneously depict Kamini's penchant for megalomania. A prodigal president, Kamini has wasted the material resources of his country on frivolities and inanities and crashed the economy, which explains why he brings Chairman of the Bugaran Central Bank to source for a World Bank loan of two hundred million dollars. Like the giants,

the embassy looks full and gorgeous outside but is hollow and rotten inside. For instance, the telex has been cut off because the embassy lacks funds to settle its bills. The playwright uses irony to punch holes in the grandiose edifice which is emblematic of the giants' self-aggrandizement. Kamini appropriates and dispenses Buganda as his private property. He tells Professor Batey, one of his African-American admirers: "this embassy is your own home. You must use it as if it is your own home. Madame Ambassador, I hope you are taking good notice. I want Professor Batey to have everything he wants anytime day and night" (p.42). Thus the setting reveals African leaders' profligacy and mismanagement of resources which ensures the continued economic retardation of the continent.

A tableau, the opening scene portrays the giants as ceremonial fops and stupid megalomaniacs whose lust for power is excessive and repulsive. The characters are placed on three levels of power. The reigning giants occupy the highest level; Gudrum the Scandinavian journalist is located on the middle level, while Sculptor from Madame Tussaud's in London operates at the lowest level. A perfect replica of a three-tiered capitalist society, the gradation approximates the amount of freedom and political power enjoyed and exercised respectively by the characters in the play. Inverted, the order depicts their different degrees of intellectual perspicacity and moral probity. Sculptor in this respect is the most perceptive and most sensitive of the lot, while the ruling giants, the wreckers of the work of the earth's toilers, are the stupidest and most depraved. A representative of the perpetually wavering middle class, Gudrum veers between sheer ignorance of Africa and dubious knowledge oriented toward promotion of self. She, too, like the giants, cuts an obscene and repulsive figure. Soyinka's sympathies no doubt lie with workers, represented by Sculptor, whose labour in fact builds the world. Huge as the wearer's physique, Kamini's military dress uniform is covered with medals. In contrast, Kasco is dwarfish but is equally adorned with showy medals and, to boot, wears a cloak of imperial purple. The Emperor's dwarfish size deflates his ballooned ego and status. Gunema is in tails of immaculate cut. His decorations consist of a red sash and blue rosette and a couple of medals. Their heavy throne-like chairs are awe-inducing and portray them as monomaniacs who ape God.

There is good use of colour symbolism in the tableau. Yellow (the gold-gilt balcony railing) symbolizes opulence, purple (Kasco's cloak) royalty, red (Gunema's sash) danger and mysticism, and blue (Gunema's rosette) nobility. The life-size group sculpture is a graphic and symbolic representation of the play and Sculptor's comment that the sculptural piece properly belongs in "the Chamber of Horrors" sums up Soyinka's criticism of the drama {p.28}. In other words, the play is a vision of horror and madness and thus has as its precursors *Kongi's Harvest*<sup>2</sup> and *Madmen and Specialists*.<sup>3</sup> The African dictators portrayed in the three plays are terrors who create horrors in their respective countries and contribute immensely to the invention of the image of black Africa as an underdeveloped land of modern-day cannibals and savages. An iconoclast, Soyinka exposes the despots' delusion of grandeur and represents their display of power as obscene and vulgar.

Field-Marshal Kamini, the central character around whom the dramatic action revolves, is represented as a despotic madman. In the Introduction to the play, Wole Soyinka calls Idi Amin the former Ugandan President a "certified psychopath" (p.vi). His first statement and first gesture in the play: "Only one thing to do to subversive – Khrr! (*A meaningful gesture across his throat*)" (p.2) are incontrovertible proof that he is a murderer. In the Introduction to *The Burden of Memory: The Muse of Forgiveness*, Soyinka calls Amin "our greatest butcher of his time" and "a practicing cannibal".<sup>4</sup>

Kamini's bloodthirstiness has driven critics of his demonic style of administration into exile and the family of any known runaway subversive is wiped out. Sometimes, his guards take bribes and allow families of runaways to flee. His lust for women is as egregious as his passion for political power. He agrees with Gunema that "a leader should have many wives" on whom to practise his sexual power and demonstrate his virility (p.4). In some primitive cultures, a king who has lost his sexual potency is put to death.<sup>5</sup>

An insensitive ignoramus, Kamini cares not whether the World Bank mortgages Bugara body and soul. All the attempts made by Chairman of the Bugaran Central Bank to make him understand why the conditions set by the lending institution are unacceptable and why any currency needs backing fail. Told by President Kamini to get back to Bugara and start printing more bank notes after his failure to obtain the loan, Chairman of the Bugaran Central Bank remarks that Bugaran currency has so depreciated in value that "it is not worth its size in toilet paper" (p.7). Incensed by the harmless statement, Kamini calls the Chairman a traitor and orders that his head be permanently put in a toilet and flushed over with water every time the cistern is full. Although he does not actually eat the tyrant's shit, the Chairman is made to smell it and his pleas for understanding fall on deaf ears. Kamini does not know anything about economic and financial management and would not allow anybody to educate him on the matter or any other, for example, waxworks.

In the same vein, he cannot suffer Gunema's attempt to either intellectualize the idea of power or draw an analogy between voodoo and sexual power. As far as the savage ruler is concerned, to reason is to cause confusion and so he bans thought altogether. He is portrayed as a crude and devilish buffoon and sadist who derives a great deal of pleasure from inflicting pain on people who show the least sign of possessing a modicum of intellectual power, for their knowledge easily exposes his own stupidity. He thinks like a cretin or lunatic. Knowledge is welcome only if it is pressed into the service of inflating and massaging his ego, as Gudrum does shamelessly in the profusely illustrated book *The Black Giant at Play* and Professor Batey in *The Black Giant at Work*. In other words, he sees eye to eye with only fawners, praise-singers, and sycophants who feed him with lies and laud him as an astute and heroic revolutionary and as a great and superb administrator. A liar himself, he claims that he is a descendant of Chaka the Zulu and brags that, like the Zulu Emperor, he killed his first lion at the age of seven years!

Sculptor's attempt to educate him on the several stages in the production of a waxwork is mistaken for an insult, and for making the highly illuminating Chamber-of-Horror remark, he is beaten black and blue by the Task Force Specials on Kamini's orders and his body is wrapped in bandages from head to toe. Lack of knowledge lies at the root of Africa's underdevelopment. Kamini's stubborn refusal to learn worsens the matter. It is no wonder then that members of his delegation run away for their dear lives, an act considered by the tyrant as treason itself. Their desertion robs him of his *sang-froid* and makes posing for Sculptor no longer possible. Consequently, he suspends work on the sculpture and gives as reason the need to allow the sitters and Sculptor to eat. Ambassador's report on the delegates' disappearance, however, brings Kamini to the sudden realization of his human limitation. He confesses: "There is so much corruption. One man cannot supervise everything" (p.26). Soyinka's subtle innuendo is that Kamini rules over a corrupt state and sets the pattern followed by his security personnel. Corruption has laid most African nations prostrate and bled them dry. Gunema claims that with the aid of voodoo it is possible for one man to police everywhere every time,

which implies that voodoo is superior to physical or military power on which Kamini counts.

Kamini, like most African heads of states on whom the giants are patterned, loves grandiloquent titles. From the playwright's perspective, honorific titles that are neither earned or merited are vacuous and render their bearers easy targets of satire. Kamini's expectation that Sculptor stand up as a mark of respect for him anytime he enters the room is absurd and tantamount to an outright bastardization of the African tradition of giving respect to elders. A sybarite, he clings tenaciously to power even after the coup against him has been reported. He threatens that if the coup is not reversed by the world powers, nobody will leave the Embassy alive. The preponderance of military coups in Africa is traceable to the life of comfort and ease guaranteed by political office. It is not the patriotic zeal to serve or correct mistakes of civilian government but the lust for perquisites of office and privileges that makes the armed forces desire political power in Africa. As disclosed by Gunema, "...after a while, we cease to govern, to lead" (p.2). In effect, he is saying that they cling to power for its sake or allure. His view is corroborated by Kasco who states that "If you think first of responsibility and governing, you give up search for power" (p.2). The failure of political leadership continues to be a worrisome problem in black Africa. Dealing with the problem is made extremely difficult by the fact that the bad governments on the African continent present a false image of themselves to the outside world. For example, Kamini portrays himself to the Secretary-General of the United Nations as an altruistic and kind leader who takes good care of Sculptor who fell from a ladder while spying, which is a patent lie.

As the drama draws to a close, Kamini's actions and outbursts become increasingly hyperbolic, incredible and lunatic and the mask of an affable and large-hearted leader drops. Conceited and deluded, he plans to attack South Africa and whines that the super-powers deny him the atomic bomb with which to defeat apartheid. He lives in a world of illusion till the very end. Two illusions would suffice: one, he mistakes Bugaran protesters for his supporters and, two, he dreams of taking over the United States. As if to make good his threat, he launches an attack on the United Nations Building in an attempt to raze it. He gives Batey, who is pleading that he should not blow up the Bugaran Embassy in which his brother giants, the Secretary-General of the UN, two Russian Delegates and two American Delegates are being held hostage, "*a back-handed swipe that knocks him flat on his back*" (p.68), a dastardly act that finally convinces the African-American that Kamini is indeed a madman. His character reveals the necessity to subject contestants for political office to rigorous psychiatric tests and the precariousness of a world with mounds of weapons of mass destruction. All that is required to trigger off a festival of nuclear conflagrations and destroy the world is a preposterous attack on a super-power or its ally by another super-power whose leader has gone crazy. Thus *A Play of Giants* is a serious warning on the urgency to safeguard the world against use of nuclear arsenals by psychopaths, and there is no better way to do it than to destroy the weapons.

A contestant for the crown of tyranny, Benefacio Gunema is only one degree lower in megalomania and obsession with power than Kamini. His thinness is a symbolic expression of the smallness of the country over which he exercises power. He portrays himself as a good and healthy lover, but the playwright represents him as a pervert. A specialist on the various manifestations of power, he identifies terrorists as people who seek not government but vengeance and enjoy secret power. The four giants, in his opinion, have put politics behind them, being "gifted naturally with leadership" and existing, as they do, "in a rare space which is – power" (p.2). Thus absolute untrammelled

power transcends petty bickerings and schematic intrigues of politicians and puts its possessor in a special realm that equals or surpasses God's heavenly abode in grandeur. Whereas Jehovah occasionally leaves His throne, comes down to earth and condescends to reason with people, the giants never dialogue with people or part from the ambience of grandeur and power. Rather, they banish thought and proscribe debates, two human activities which often breed dissension and the party spirit and corrode power. For power to remain pure, all subjects under its wielder must be robbed of their individual wills and reduced to obsequious toads and unthinking zombies that can be freely manipulated, as puppets are.

Gunema throws light on the character of voodoo power, his unrivalled speciality: "Voodoo power is tranquil, *extendido*, like you making love to woman you really love or possess. You dominate her but still you make the love prolong, not to body alone but to her soul" (p.4). Since it affects both the physical and the spiritual, voodoo can be rated the most dreadful and most effective form of power. It has no spatial and temporal limits and can be deployed against even the dead. General Franco the late Spanish dictator, in Gunema's view, exemplifies military power, while Papa Doc Duvalier the late dictator of Haiti typifies a dispenser of voodoo power. He thinks that Franco who kept Spain peaceful for forty years would be a better Secretary-General of the UN than the incumbent. His confession that Papa Doc Duvalier is more knowledgeable than he (Gunema) is in the practice of voodoo at least shows that he is honest and not as boastful as Kamini, who claims that Papa Doc cannot bewitch him, a spurious claim that is best interpreted as a braggadocio.

A man with an intellectual bent and therefore a foil and a threat to Kamini the dunce, Gunema remarks that "Alexander was an African" and that the name is "African to the core" (p.18). His voodoo power notwithstanding, Gunema envies the three other giants because of their accession to power through military coups, which he describes as "straightforward" and "mechanical" (p.21). "Power", he confesses, "is something I must experience another way...I inhabit, I think, the nebulous geography of power. That is why, always, I am searching to taste it. You understand, really taste it on my tongue. To seize it *a la boca*, roll and roll it in the mouth and let it [it] trickle inwards, like an infusion. Once, only once, I think I succeed" (p.21). It was the occasion on which he made love to the wife of a man whom he suspected of plotting against him and who had already been condemned to death by a tribunal. Power, for him, should not be an abstraction. Rather, it should be visceral, savoured with relish, thoroughly digested and excreted with gusto. His conception of power reeks of cannibalism and makes clearer the relationship between power and cannibalism enunciated by Tuboum. Whatever their individual idiosyncrasies in the conceptualization of power, the indisputable fact is that the giants prey on black Africa and leave it terribly diminished. Gunema suggests that the best way to rid the envious of the quest for power is to turn such people into zombies. "I am not sentimental", he boasts (p.3). As proof, he does his own executions either with the gun or by hanging the condemned, and he enjoys watching the zombies under his control torture lesser zombies.

Though puny in physical stature, Emperor Kasco is majestic and unique in his understanding of the phenomenon of power. His megalomania equals and probably surpasses Kamini's. "Power", he tells his comrades, "comes only with the death of politics. That is why I choose to become emperor. I place myself beyond politics.... Now I inhabit only the pure realm of power. I fear, *mes amis*, all three of you have chosen to remain in the territory of politics" (p.21). Afraid that the weak minds in his empire might imitate the Bugaran coup plotters, he decides to "safeguard the bullets" and is desperate

to send home a telex message to that effect (p.53). The emperor is unaware that he is already a hostage in the Bugaran Embassy, a victim of Kamini's mad pursuit of power.

General Barra Tuboum arrives late at the United Nations because he has been busy suppressing a revolt back home in his country. He has not only quashed the rebellion but has also killed all the ring leaders except three, who are brought to be exhibited at the UN as specimens before he serves them up at a cocktail party for members in celebration of his victory. His leopards (security guards) kill and eat people who try to pry into their mysteries, for "it is the only way to ensure the re-absorption of that power of yourself which has been sucked away by profaning eyes" (p.19). His costumes – a striped animal skin "Mao" outfit with matching fez-style hat, an ebony walking stick and an ivory-handed side-arm in a holster which is also made of zebra skin – portray him as a promoter of the indigenous culture of his people in a revolting and exhibitionistic manner. In recognition of the primacy of the autochthonous, the culture buff has changed his name from Alexander, which is foreign, to Barra Tuboum, which is indigenous. The rub is that the new name Barra Boum Boum Tuboum Gbazo Tse Tse Khoru diDzo – quite a mouthful – signifies his murderous tendencies and passion for grandiloquent titles and self-aggrandizement. He is as deleterious as tsetse flies to the health of society. Moreover, his heavily onomatopoeic name echoes the guns of his "striped" leopards that sound "Boom, Boom Tuboum. Boom, Boom Tuboum" (p.20) as they mow down the rebels and some of their hostages (the mine workers of Shabira, their families, priests, nuns, children, foreigners and citizens alike). The name is symbolic of horror and terror. An extremist in whatever he does, he has changed even the names of his father's headstones, an irrational and unnecessary action. The worst is that he has plans to get his people to change all the names on their cemeteries, and that extremist policy also truly portrays him as a dictator.

Rather than recoiling from the ludicrous idea of changing names of the dead, a risible idea thematized by Jose Saramago in the novel *All the Names* ("the dead are all equal"<sup>6</sup>), the other giants applaud it and embrace their scatterbrained brother. Only Gunema the tyrant with an intellectual bent has a bone to pick with Tuboum over the name issue. Hear him: "I still wish you do not change name. After this [the ruthless crushing of the rebellion], everybody will have call you Alexander the Great. Who will remember name of Barra Tuboum?" (p.19). Completely assimilated in the culture of the conquistadors, Gunema has got his imagination imprisoned in colonial history. Hunger for fame is one of the forces that drive the giants to extremism. Owing to lack of a sense of proportion, everything they do is grotesque. Nothing in their life is kept at a balanced and moderate level. However, their over-exaggerated gestures, exceedingly ludicrous manners and grotesqueries are rich, unfailing sources of laughter in the play. To their adorners, their antics and devilish thoughts are demonstrations of their physical prowess, mental alertness and sagacity. It is clear that without the fawners and lickspittles, it would be difficult for the dictators to stay long in power.

Soyinka is critical of the role played by Mayor of Hyacombe and Professor Batey who represent the Black Caucuses in the United States in the play. The two characters are taken in by Kamini's droll antics, symbolic gestures, and manic tantrums directed at the plague of white racism and Western capitalist imperialism. The Black Caucuses were deceived by President Idi Amin's posturing as a black activist and saw him as a misunderstood heroic black revolutionary who was out to talk back, like Malcolm X, and take vengeance on Europe and America for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the colonial conquest of Africa and neo-colonialism. Hence, they 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 pre-colonial Africa and the atrocities being perpetrated by its present crop of demented rulers. African-Americans and the black Diaspora as a whole find any negative comment about Africans and African cultures totally unacceptable. Their uncritical attitude does not help Africans to identify, expose and expel the demons that destroy their land. Even if the demons are exposed, as Soyinka does in *A Play of Giants*, they are defended by their African-American flatterers and their sullied image is burnished and refurbished. As demonstrated in the play, the Black Caucuses mean well but have a wrong and deodorized image of Africa.

Given the giants' proclivity for profligacy, it would be wrong to accuse the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Paris Club of being solely responsible for the current economic misfortune of Africa. Bad governance in Africa has weakened the demand on Europe and America for reparations and restitution for the enslavement and colonization of black Africans. Concerning African on African violence, Soyinka made the following important observation:

The crimes that the African continent commits against her kind are of a dimension and, unfortunately, of a nature that appears to constantly provoke memories of the historic wrongs inflicted on that continent by others. There are moments when it almost appears as if there is a diabolical continuity (and inevitability?) to it all – that the conduct of latter-day (internal) slave runners is merely the stubborn precipitate of a yet unexpiated past. The ancient slave stockades do not seem ever to have vanished; they appear more to have expanded, occupying indiscriminate spaces that often appear contingent with national boundaries.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps, Kamini fails to pay back previous loans and interest on them because he considers them as part of the reparation due Africa. Well, the World Bank is justified if it refuses to give him further credit. As a Yoruba proverb puts it: “*Eni to ya egbefa ti ko san, o begi dina egbaa*. A person who has defaulted on a [loan of] 1200 cowries, thus disqualifies himself for 2000 cowries credit.”<sup>8</sup> Had African-Americans been fully integrated into the American society after the abolition of slavery, Soyinka argued, “the calls for reparations from the African continent would have failed to resonate in America.”<sup>9</sup> By extension or implication, Mayor of Hyacombe and Professor Batey would have not been on the side of Kamini. Rather, they would have played a different kind of economic politics and demanded that financial reparations be made not to descendants of Africans who sold their kin into slavery but to descendants of slaves.

As far as the playwright is concerned, Batey is only being obdurate, especially after learning of the disappearance of his friend Dr. Kiwawa who represents Byron Kadadwa, a Ugandan playwright, to whom *A Play of Giants* is dedicated. Kamini fibs that all his fleeing advisers and secretaries do so because they have embezzled money. Instead of being skeptical and suspicious, Batey swallows the lie. He has visited Bugara and could not see any of the atrocities Kamini was committing. The ones reported in the Western media are condemned as imperialist propaganda. He is one of the scholars who perceive contemporary life in Africa as purely the tragic consequence of the exploitative nature of colonial and neo-colonial economy and who blame Western capitalists and imperialists for the disorder in the land. There is truth in what they are saying, that transnational conglomerates continue to milk African economies and thus deepen neo-colonial misery, but they ought not to be silent about the damage being done by Africans

to their own societies. African countries are not doing enough to be economically independent.

Apparently, Batey has not heeded Soyinka's warning in the poem *Ogun Abibiman* that the black Diaspora, particularly African-Americans, should beware of embracing President Idi Amin who, in his candid opinion, is a viper that claims to be Shaka's descendant and yet stings Shaka's progeny. In the poem, Shaka expresses his anger at Idi Amin's atrocities and issues a strong warning to the blacks who see the recidivist as a revolutionary:

Quicker too my rouse of rage by feet  
 Rotted in lakes of blood from my descendant kin  
 Yet claimants to the sandals I have worn.  
 Distance breeds ignorance, your companion host  
 From far-flung lands of Abibiman may seek  
 A leader in the heart of amaZulu and embrace  
 A viper. Bid them beware. The viper knows  
 No kin. The bond of blood to him is – letting  
 Bid all beware the scorpion in the thatch –  
 His cunning lacks all shame.  
 Make note of the dealer in death  
 A stink of the hyena, gorged in carrion.  
 Ravenous of fame – he dreams his image Shaka.<sup>10</sup>

If Shaka occasionally slipped and wasted lives, it was also true that he built a big empire, invented military weapons, devised novel war strategies, and fought to liberate his people. On the contrary, Idi Amin destroyed his country without creating. "He mashes earth/In mock-heroes, laying waste to ant-hills."<sup>11</sup> Of his droll antics, the greatest achievement that won him African-Americans' adulation – forcing white men to carry him in a hammock the way African porters used to bear and transport white colonialists – made him appear as a clown and jester, because it had no strong economic and technological backing. It could be likened to a beggar pretending to be a billionaire. Amin is a "bloated leech" burrowing deep in Shaka's "majestic mane" and fawners who rationalize his murderous deeds tell "idiot tales", for Shaka's world is not rebuilt from "limbs of his defenceless sons".<sup>12</sup> Soyinka is contemptuous of the monster's cheerleaders.

Batey exposes the treachery of the two Russian Delegates. Speaking in Russian, First Russian daubs Kamini a "buffoon" and an "overgrown child" (p.45) and asks his colleague to give him the Babushka doll to play with and tear to pieces to his heart's content in place of limbs of Bugaran workers and peasants. Second Russian's translations are full of lies. To Batey, the Russian's sarcastic remarks issue from white racism and amount to Western imperialist propaganda against Africa. Recognizing the political and military implications of Kamini detaining the two Russian Delegates against their will, he pleads with his friend to let them go. He interprets the coup in Bugara as a betrayal of Kamini who, in his view, is cast in the mould of such black heroes as Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney and Martin Luther King, Jr, who laboured much and made a great deal of sacrifice to liberate their people from white oppression. All he requires to rid himself of such a grand illusion and others of its ilk is a simple dose of the Kaminian treatment.

Mayor Hyacombe is spared the treatment. He, like Batey, is in raptures when he beholds Kamini in person and pays homage to the African legend and his fellow giants:

“All leaders who have given us our pride of race. You who have uplifted us from the degradation of centuries of conquest, slavery and dehumanization” (p.22). However, the Mayor has an embarrassing problem on his hands. Whereas the plan is to honour Kamini by presenting him with the key to the city of Hyacombe, there are present on the august occasion three other black African “heroes” who are equally worthy of the honour and the award. To solve the problem, the award ceremony is postponed to give the presenters time to get more keys. That the key symbolizes the freedom of the city is one of the shocking ironies in the play.

Gudrum represents the Western press and foreign propagandists who traverse corridors of power in African countries and play a despicable role in the creation and retention of dictators, solely for selfish reasons. A seductress, she adores Kamini and sees him as a sex object that can be used to satisfy her lust for the African phallus, which in her warped imagination is the longest and the strongest. A pathetic victim of the myth of black hyper sexuality, she is fixated on Kamini’s giant physique and celebrated sexual prowess. She informs on Sculptor, probably in order to curry Kamini’s favour and gain his confidence. Her repulsive physiognomy is Soyinka’s underhand strategy of exploding the myth that white is purity and perfect beauty. There is a touch of racism in her disgust for Bugaran runaways in her country. Her positive press reports on Kamini’s rule constitute additional obstacles to the liberation struggle of the Bugaran rebels. She perceives Kamini as a reincarnation of one of the great African heroes and nation-builders such as Chaka the Zulu, Sundiata and Mansa Musa. It is doubtful if she is sincere in what she says and writes about Kamini. One suspects that the paradoxical character is a secret agent. Ironically, Kamini takes her as a true friend because she tells him what he wants to hear. In contrast, he treats Sculptor whose comments are limpid and unvarnished as a spy.

*A Play of Giants* echoes other Soyinka’s dramas. The merciless beating of Sculptor by the Task Force Specials recalls in detail the inhuman treatment meted out to Segun Sowemimo by Mobile Policemen on the orders of a former Military Governor of the old Western Region of Nigeria, because of the Governor’s wife’s complaint that Sowemimo and other journalists covering a social party for the State television insulted her. Sowemimo’s ankle was smashed and after a helpless round of hospitals in Nigeria, he was flown to Britain for treatment. The leg was amputated on three different occasions and got infected with gangrene and his lungs became impaired. Finally, the man died, as the title of Soyinka’s prison notes has it.<sup>13</sup> Definitely, Soyinka had Sowemimo in mind when he wrote the following words spoken by Kamini:

We take good care of you after your accident. But if you continue to tamper with dressing, what happen? The wounds become infected. Perhaps your leg get gangrene and then the doctor must do amputation. Perhaps even your head get infection and gangrene and then the doctor must do amputation... (p.40)

What provokes the speech is Sculptor’s desperate attempt to tear off the bandages that have made him a mute, so that he can speak audibly and tell Secretary-General of the United Nations the truth. The rub is the last sentence of the speech: “Even Egyptian mummy get more sense” (p.40). Kamini’s guards have more or less reduced Sculptor to an Egyptian mummy alive by having his whole body swathed in bandages and, like the fleshpot of Egypt, the fellow is completely silenced. Parodying Dr. Bero, one of the progenitors of the despotic giants, Aafaa says in *Madmen and Specialists*: “Before we

operate we cut the vocal chords.”<sup>14</sup> To operate without hindrance, a nascent dictatorial regime silences the press, social critics, and all forms of opposition.

Batey is a development on the character of Adenebi who romanticizes pre-colonial Africa in *A Dance of the Forests*, a play written by Wole Soyinka to commemorate Nigeria’s Independence. It is not accidental that both of them are councillors and express their sensitivity in a rather cloying manner. Batey tells the four giants: “When we tell them back in Hyacombe, no not just Hyacombe, when the entire nation gets to know this, that we were able at one and the same time to shake hands with... I mean, to stand within the same four walls in the presence of ... please, forgive me, I am a very emotional person... (*He turns away, whipping out his handkerchief*) (p.23). The statement recalls that of Adenebi: “I have a weak heart. Too much emotion upsets me. This is the era of greatness...”<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, Nigeria’s attainment of political Independence did not usher in an era of greatness. Neither did the four giants bring greatness to Africa. On the contrary, they brought untold disasters and obloquy. The councillors’ opinion on the greatness of the two occasions is not only exaggerated but specious.

Soyinka exposes the mechanisms exploited by despots to entrench themselves in power and indicts both the capitalist West and the socialist East for propping up unpopular regimes in Africa, in order to prosecute their own selfish politico-economic agenda. Super-powers stir up conflicts on the African continent and sell arms to warring parties, thereby profiting from the nations’ miseries and woes. “All the big powers”, in Tuboum’s view, “make trouble” (p.43). They perceive and use African leaders as mere pawns on the race-riddled chessboard of world economy and world politics and so play a significant and diabolical role in deepening the crises of Africa’s economic dependence and political instability.

The play exposes the duplicity and brutal, amoral conception of international relations by the super-powers. As deployed by the two Russian Delegates and the two American Delegates, the language of diplomacy is replete with deceit and tergiversation. Although the two ideological blocs are opposed and practise a virulent form of Cold War politics, they find a common interest in ridiculing Kamini, who has just been forced out of power, and making him the butt of their oblique satire and caustic racial jokes. Yet, both ideological blocs have alternately given him their support and closed their eyes to his maladministration and the oppression of his people. The playwright reveals the duplicity of Socialist Russia that knows Kamini to be a butcher and yet supports his regime and blocks any libellous motion brought against his government at the United Nations.

Although Soyinka has sympathies for socialism, he does not subscribe to slogan-mongering by socialist ideologues. In the play, he censures both ideological blocs for their opportunism and pride. As disclosed by Second Russian, the British had created Kamini and the Americans had backed him up. Then they quarreled and the Russians moved in to fill the vacuum (p.55). Kamini confesses that the British and the Americans helped him to make his coup and alleges that they have a hand in the coup that topples his government. US Delegate’s prophecy that a military coup would soon take place in the USSR has come to pass. Although the military putsch was a failure, it was proof that the USSR, unlike the US, was not a “strong powerful democratic country” (p.60). Democratic or dictatorial, both countries are snobbish and contemptuous of weak nations. Kamini criticizes them: “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” (p.62). Cold

War notwithstanding, the US and the USSR conspired against Third World countries whenever it was in their joint interest so to do. According to Kamini: “You agree everything between the two of you. You don’t care about anybody else” (p.64). He later avers that “there is no coup in the world which is not back by super-power” (p.66). Both blocs did not want the black people to succeed and become a super-power and hence they denied them access to the atomic bomb (p.68).

As represented in the play, power is monolithic and brooks no opposition. Nevertheless, it takes diverse forms, among which are economic power, language or rhetorical power, military power, political power, secret power (enjoyed by terrorists), sexual power, supernatural power (voodoo or witchcraft, as exemplified in the play), and technological power. Every giant typifies one or two forms and covertly covets the others. Consequently, there is a hidden struggle for power among them and also among their countries. The four<sup>16</sup> giants perpetuate prejudices assimilated in the colonial period. Kamini appears to be the winner. But the Pyrrhic victory is only another tantalizing illusion. Correctly read, his attack on the world powers tantamounts to a manifestation of a full-blown psychopathology, which must be dealt with intelligently and with extreme caution. It is a last minute desperate demonstration of what Kamini meant when he declared earlier in the play that “Power is indivisible” (p.4). There are other characteristics of power highlighted in the drama. It is sensuous (one can smell and taste it), mysterious (ineffable, especially voodoo), dangerous, elusive, and transient. Super-powers use their technological power to gain further economic advantage, pauperize and tyrannize the countries of the world that are already impoverished.

Awful and terrifying, the cataclysmic ending of the play can be 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 sick desire to have control over other people’s lives, over the resources of the world and its markets. One expects that in the era of globalization the struggle for power will be keener, more ruthless, and more sophisticated.

The current increasing wave of hostility towards Uncle Sam and of terrorist attacks on American targets by jihadists can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to question the pride bred by the economic, political and technological power possessed by the US. Their religious overtones notwithstanding, the attacks exemplify the perennial struggle for power. Given the horror unleashed by terrorists in recent times, environmentalists and socialists would call for a just distribution of the wealth of the world, if only in order to extirpate the spectre of envy, hatred, jealousy, and wrath and make the world a happy and safe place for all. On the contrary, capitalists and liberal humanists would argue that human beings are naturally depraved, that no amount of social engineering can put an end to free competition that causes strife, and that the strong will forever enjoy more privileges than the weak. The psychological explanation provided by the playwright for the emergence of monsters and power-perverts in the world, discounting his disavowal “I do not know how monsters come to be” (p.v), tends to locate the problem in human nature. There is no foolproof scientific solution. The instructional and heuristic function of art is as relevant as the politico-economic restructuring of society and religious sermons in combating and controlling the evil. If it cannot be completely eliminated, it can at least be reduced to a manageable proportion.

Judging by the ending of the play, Soyinka proffers the solution of creativity. While the possessed maniac Kamini and his human engines of wrath and aggression, the ferocious Task Force Specials, behave as true philistines and destroy culture, the fruit of long years of toil, Sculptor, according to the stage direction, “*works on in slow motion*”

(p.69). The open-ended closure of the drama signifies that art, like living, is an unending practice. Creativity is the last defence and hope of humanity and, if it ceases, humanity is bound to perish. Even though the devil is ever waiting in the wings to destroy the work of creation, he must not be allowed to have the final pronouncement on the matter. Therefore, producers must never give up the work of creating culture. “Indeed, according to rabbinical exegesis (Bereshit Rabba 9:4), the world did not spring from God’s hand all at once. Twenty-six attempts preceded the present Genesis, and all were doomed to failure... ‘If only this one holds’... exclaims God as He creates the world... our history bears the imprint of total insecurity.”<sup>17</sup> The play illustrates in graphic terms the insecurity and, therefore, will forever remain topical as long as the super-powers hold on to their war arsenals and the emotion of fear (angst) rules human life.

Economic and human costs of power sadism are colossal. Among its evil effects are cynicism, dehumanization of both the practitioners and their victims, fear and abulia in both parties, and death on a massive scale. Soyinka wrote in the Introduction to the play:

In human terms, what happened in Uganda was this: that nation lost its cream of professionals, its productive elite.... But Uganda also lost tens of thousands of faceless, anonymous producers, workers and peasants who were ghoulishly destroyed by this mindless terror [Idi Amin]; the attendant economic disaster is still with Uganda, compounding her political instability....What is being claimed here, in effect, is that the longer a people are subjected to the brutality of power, the longer, in geometric proportion, is the process of recovery and re-humanization.

(pp. vii-viii)

Other negative effects of a prolonged dictatorship are domestic and organized crimes, institutionalization of corruption, militarization of civilian population, vulgarization of traditional ethics, erosion of communal and family values, spiritual atrophy, despoliation of the natural environment, collapse of industries, capital flight, brain drain, and other symptoms of social anomie. The overall effect is despair, disgust and stupor bred by shock: the appalling state in which most African countries currently find themselves.

Considering the incalculable damage done to Africa by European imperialists, slavers and colonialists and their collaborators and successors, 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 in particular to come into its own. As depicted in the play, the African tragedy continues unabated as the land remains unproductive and the suffering of its peoples is unrelieved.

Not even language escapes the taint of despotism in the drama. The tyrants’ bad grammar in a way is a reflection of their misrule. Profusely employed, animal images connote the ideas of human bestiality and predatoriness. Through the use of satirical military metaphors and images of violence, the author vents his spleen on dictators who pervert language and use it treacherously to hoodwink the masses of people and cow them into total submission. Tuboum calls his hit squad “leopards” (p.19) because of their destructive power and incredible celerity, while Kamini pours invectives on his runaway Ambassador. She is a “Cow!” and “Female bastard!” (p.51); the other fleeing officials are “Sons of stinking imperialist rats” (p.51); the coup plotters are carrion-eating “vultures” (p.59); and Sculptor is a “brass-monkey” (p.42). Kasco images people who are envious of power-holders and quest for it as “ants” and “flies” that lay maggots and waste the red meat of power (p.56). The giants do violence to language and the animal images portray them as inhuman, contemptible, corrupt and rotten creatures who live a

dissolute life. As used by Soyinka to characterize Kamini, a lunatic who calls the sane mad, a wicked soul who pretends to be a good Samaritan, irony can madden the sensitive and the overly politically conscious. In a sense, the play is aimed at unraveling the art of dissimulation, which is vividly illustrated in the translation session, and at fighting tyrants' suppression of truth. For democracy to thrive, freedom of speech must be guaranteed.

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 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; their manner is ludicrous and stiff; and their mien is mean. Everything about them is unnatural. Through the use of burlesque and image-reversal, Soyinka downgrades and ridicules the temporal powers that have inflated themselves to incredibly monstrous proportions. The satire says simply that they, too, like ordinary simple folk, are blood and clay and therefore mortal! It suggests that the traditional 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 has also lost its moorings right from the foundation level. Soyinka perceives the lack of disciplined and responsible leadership as the bane of politics in black Africa.

#### NOTES

1. Wole Soyinka, *A Play of Giants*. London and New York: Methuen, 1984, p.i.  
Further references to the play are incorporated into the essay.
2. Wole Soyinka, "Kongi's Harvest", *Collected Plays, 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, 59-141.
3. Wole Soyinka, "Madmen and Specialists", *Collected Plays, 2*, 215-276.
4. Wole Soyinka, "Introduction", *The Burden of Memory: The Muse of Forgiveness*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.11.
5. James George Frazer, "Kings Killed When Their Strength Fails", *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. London: Papermac, 1987, pp. 265-274.
6. Jose Saramago, *All the Names*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1999, p.234.
7. *The Burden of Memory*, pp. 19-20.
8. Bola Babalakin, *Selected Yoruba Proverbs and Wise Sayings*. Lagos: West African Book Publishers Ltd., 2002, p.35.
9. *The Burden of Memory*, p.37.
10. Wole Soyinka, *Ogun Abibiman*. London: Rex Collings, in association with Opon Ifa, Ibadan, 1976, pp. 14-15.
11. *ibid.*, p. 15.

12. *ibid.*, p.16.
13. Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1975, pp. 302-305.
14. “Madmen and Specialists”, *Collected Plays*, 2, 228.
15. Wole Soyinka, “A Dance of the Forests”, *Collected Plays*, 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, 11.
16. A fifth giant in the person of General Sani Abacha the late Nigerian Head of State has emerged. He is the butt of *King Baaba*, which was premiered at the National Theatre, Iganmu, Lagos, on 6 August, 2001.
17. Andre Neher, “The View of Time and History in Jewish Culture”, *Cultures and Time*, Paul Ricoeur, *et al.* (eds.). Paris: The Unesco Press, 1976, pp. 155-156.