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Soyinka's use of satire to forecast the evolution of civilizations: the power drive is the supreme evil

Wole Soyinka, Africa's first Nobel Laureate for Literature, has a well-deserved reputation as the most consistently trenchant satirist among African writers. He has throughout his career written plays and occasional sketches which directly focus on current social and political evils and heap mockery on their perpetrators. He will remain an important figure among conscientious writers and political analysts of the African continent for as long as the world of literature shapes our sense of things, of history and culture, politics and street life, gender and issues about women, hope and despondency, life and death. Like very few writers writing today, Soyinka will be remembered not simply for the personal sacrifices he has made to his nation and the African continent but also for the wealth of literary legacy he has already bequeathed to mankind. Indeed, the evidence everywhere in the world shows that Soyinka's literature and cultural theories have attracted enormous popularity, patronage and commentaries. This is not only gauged by the amount of his works we read or by the sheer number of academic dissertations that have been written on his books since his first published play was performed. The wide popularity of his texts in the school system all over the world is a strong indication of his enormous place in contemporary African culture and letters. But the man still lives. He still writes. He provides minute-to-minute account of where "the rain started beating" us to use the apt phrase by another famous Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe. This is a source of joy and inspiration to those who consider his voice, his very presence, an alternative means of articulating life in a precariously balanced world. As long as he lives,

it seems he will continue to produce more of the literature that chronicles our collective existence and in Soyinka's own words "the recurrent circle of human stupidities".

In his primarily satirical theatre Soyinka's gaze is firmly fixed on contemporary social and political life, and what he sees, before all else, is the ruthless exercise and abuse of power. Power has, in fact, an obsessive fascination for Soyinka, and a double face. In its creative, spiritual form he is its celebrant, even as he recognizes that the force of its creative energy may take it into destructive excesses. But in its aspect as political or social control, the power drive is the supreme evil, which he sees as being everywhere and at all times deeply corrupting and destructive.

From the very outset, consciously or unconsciously, Soyinka has been wary of the nation as a goal that the colonized peoples fought for, as a beacon of liberation from institutionalized oppression. This can, in retrospect, be attributed to the limitations of the very concept of nation that was a fruit of a particular strand of nineteenth--century European political thought. From *A Dance of the Forests*, the play that Soyinka wrote to celebrate the coming to birth of the Nigerian nation, this open scepticism has been apparent. In the final scene of *A Dance of the Forests*, as power-hungry humans reborn through the centuries as corrupt oppressors and exploiters of the common people, struggle for possession of the half-child, we are made aware of Soyinka's macabre, prophetic vision for the future. The nation is unformed, or perhaps deformed, by history, an unborn or still-born child of the past. The Biafran war, the military regimes, the abrogation of the democratic election of 1993, and all the atrocities that are still going on in Nigeria in the 21st century, all show that Soyinka's grotesque prophecy of the future of the post-colonial nation was fulfilled almost to the letter.

With *Kongi's Harvest*, Soyinka moves heavily into the realm of political satire. Written in the mid-sixties and first directed by the author in 1966 this play marks a significant shift in Soyinka's approach to the question of generic identity. It is conceivable that the 1965 military takeover of government in Nigeria, together with the playwright's growing realization that the nationalist leadership had been engaged in elaborately eccentric forms of despotism and corruption, prompted him to seek a new representational mode. This new language is committed to a full and total revelation of the foundations as well as the surface manifestations of tyranny and greed, for, as Soyinka himself puts it "when power is placed in the service of vicious reaction, a language must be called into being which does its best to appropriate such obscenity of power and fling its excesses back in its face" making "language… a part of resistance therapy." (*SCP 2*, xiv)

The play concerns what appears to be a newly independent African nation called Isma. There is a political struggle in Ismaland between the traditional monarch, *Oba Danlola* and a modernized intellectual dictator named *Kongi*. Kongi is a post-colonial leader who has just ascended to power having prosecuted a successful war of decolonisation. It has been widely speculated that Soyinka's dictator is based on Kwame Nkrumah and Hastings Banda, respectively the first post-colonial leaders of Ghana and Malawi. Both had a penchant for style, and it is the obsession with self-presentation that afflicts Kongi, with most of the play taken up with his preparation for the public meeting where, forcibly, but with the seeming consent of Oba Danlola, he will take over the emblems

and symbols of traditional power, thus removing the only source of institutionalised opposition. Thus, the main target of the satire in the first part of the play is Kongi's preoccupation with fashioning himself into an imagined omnipotent leader; and, as we see the lengths to which he will go in order to effect such a transformation, we become aware of the pathological nature of his obsession, and laughter gives way to the realization that such madness is not only funny but destructive.

From the beginning we know that Kongi has imprisoned and robbed of his political power the traditional paramount chief, Oba Danlola. To legitimise his seizure of power Kongi lays claim to the Oba's spiritual authority through his ritual consecration of the crops of the annual New Yam Festival. Danlola obstinately refuses to surrender his sacred functions and spends a great deal of his imprisonment play-acting and posturing so as to keep Kongi deceived and confused about whether he will attend the ceremony at which power is to be transferred. The real challenge to Kongi's despotism appears to come not from Danlola, however, but from his nephew and heir, Daodu, the head of a successful farming commune.

Daodu's more dramatic revolution however fails, and in this Soyinka is consistent with his avoidance of grand dramatic endings in which evil is put down and a brand-new regime of good succeeds. In Soyinka's plays the theme of change is introduced as a sort of "dream differed" that is generally out of the reach of human beings, locked as they are within "the recurrent cycle of human stupidity"[1], and compelled to rely on the uncertain heroism of a few extraordinary individuals who are well-meaning but powerless in the face of the anomy prevailing in today's world. Such a tragic viewpoint hardly allows for any hope of progress; it comes within the province of a cyclic conception of human destiny which arises from Yoruba cosmogony and is little adapted to the demands of the struggle for life which man's survival in our societies implies.

For the playwright, the culminating impact of massive corruption of civilian politics and its inevitable demise at the hands of the armed forces, a frightening increase in military authoritarianism, and the catastrophic realities of coups and counter-coups, as factions of the ruling class struggle for power, as well as his own detainment and imprisonment for almost two years (1967–1969) was to draw his disillusionment and pessimism into a pus that would burst open into the mature, unequivocal satiric dimensions of *Opera Wonyosi*, *Requiem for a Futurologist*, and, at the peak of his satiric maturity, *A Play of Giants*. Before his incarceration, the optimism that Soyinka had with regard to the political, post-independence, power-corrupted deadlocks, not only in Nigeria but across Africa, was conveyed by characters such as Sekoni in the novel *The Interpreters*. But the bitter truth of such frustrated optimism is its experienced and mature pessimism, the perpetual futility of struggle by the "wasted generation", whose various fates of suicide, death and mysterious disappearance are conveyed, in parodic and satirical sketches, in *Opera Wonyosi*.

Although freely adapted from Bertolt Brecht's *Die Dreigroschen Oper* (1928), which is itself a very loose adaptation of the 18th century English play on thieves and vaga-

[1] W. Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State", [in:] P. Waestberg, *The Writer in Modern Africa*, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies (Uppsala, 1968), p. 20.

bonds, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) by John Gay, *Opera Wonyosi* (1977) is unmistakeably Nigerian in the world-view it exposes and castigates. Both titles, like Soyinka's, are ironical, and reflect the fact that both the plays were critical of their societies. Gay satirized the Whig ascendancy in London; Brecht satirized the excesses of the Weimar Republic in Germany, which was set up after the defeat of Germany in the First World War and before Adolf Hitler's rise to power. Neither satire was revolutionary. Gay certainly did not seek the dissolution of the aristocracy – or the emergent bourgeoisie. His satire was directed against individuals and his play aimed at personal reform. Brecht, however, did intend a more fundamental political impact when presenting his play. Using Gay's story of double-dealing and betrayal amongst the criminals and urban destitute, Brecht's play attempts a class analysis and is an indictment of capitalism and the late bourgeois world.

Soyinka, thus, transposes the 18th century London of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and the Victorian Soho of Brecht's *Die Dreigroschen Oper* to a bidonville of Bangui, capital of the former Central African Republic, on the eve of the imperial coronation of Jean-Bedel Bokassa (who was to be overthrown two years later when his involvement in the murder of schoolchildren became widely known). The obscenely decadent extravaganza of Bokassa's coronation, in one of Africa's poorest countries, took place in the same week as Soyinka's Ife production and substitutes for the royal jubilee that forms the background to the action in the Gay and Brecht originals.[2]

All three operas are set in the underworld of criminals, pimps, prostitutes and beggars, and the conflict is between two underworld characters for more power and a wider sphere of operations. One of the men is known as the King of Beggars. He has turned the begging of the deformed and distressed into a profitable and well-run business. In Soyinka's play this man is Chief Anikura; in Brecht's and Gay's plays he is called Peachum. The other man is a big-time robber: in Gay's play a highway robber; in all three plays the leader of a gang of robbers, known as Captain Macheath, Mack the knife, or simply Mackie. In Brecht's play, and after him in Soyinka's play, both these men struggle for supremacy within the unbroken continuum of the criminal, professional and business worlds for a monopoly of the pickings. Brecht laboriously tried to show that, under capitalism, there is no difference between the morality of legal business practice and of crime. Capitalism itself was according to Brecht state crime. Soyinka is less concerned to prove this link than simply to demonstrate it in a more general indictment of greed, materialism and exploitation, in a system in which 'socialists' are as culpable as 'capitalists'.

Preferring Gay's ebullient indictment of specific historical vices and corruptions to Brecht's portrayal of universal human depravity, Soyinka uses the wise-cracking cynicism of the expatriate scoundrels to draw up a ghastly inventory of Nigerian outrages in the years of the oil dollar, or *petro-naira*. In a prefatory note to the original playscript Soyinka stated that:

[2] The first performance of the play was directed by Mr. Wole Soyinka himself at the Ife University Convocation in December, 1977. The play was not to be published until 1981.

> "Opera Wonyosi has been written at a high period of Nigeria's social decadence the like of which will probably never again be experienced. The post Civil-war years, after an initial period of uncertainty – two or three years at the most – has witnessed Nigeria's self engorgement at the banquet of highway robberies, public executions, public floggings and other institutionalised sadisms, arsons, individual and mass megalomania, racketeering, hoarding epidemic, road abuse and reckless slaughter exhibitionism – state and individual, callous and contemptuous ostentation, casual cruelties, wanton destruction, slummification, Nairamania and its attendant atavism (ritual murder for wealth), an orgy of physical filth, champagne, usury, gadgetry, blood … the near-total collapse of human communication. There are sounds however of slithering brakes at the very edge of the precipice (…)"[3].

Soyinka attempted to hold up to ridicule and scorn many of the social atrocities committed in the morally confused post-war era. The story of Mack the Knife was a convenient peg on which to hang his charges against his countrymen, for the underworld ambiance of such a traditional villain-hero was sufficiently distanced in time and place to provide a large-scale perspective on the subject of human depravity, thereby imbuing the dramatic action with a semblance of "universality", yet at the same time that ambiance resembled so closely the cut-throat atmosphere of the "high period of Nigeria's social decadence" that Mackie could be easily assimilated as a local folk-hero/villain. Nigerian audiences would not be likely to question the stylized squalor of the beggar's world portrayed in this opera, for that would be tantamount to denying the surreal dimensions of their own corrupted world. Soyinka had chosen an excellent warped mirror to reflect the absurdities of an unbalanced age. As he said rather playfully in the playbill to the original production at the University of Ife: "We proudly affirm that the genius of race portrayed in this opera is entirely, indisputably and vibrantly Nigerian. We therefore insist, in view of all the above, that the characters in this opera are either strangers or fictitious, for Nigeria is stranger than fiction, and that any resemblance to any Nigerian living or dead, is purely accidental, unintentional and instructive[4]".

It may be no mere coincidence that both Brecht and Soyinka reworked the story of Mack the Knife in a post-war era, for both must have felt that their countrymen had learned nothing from the horrors of the holocaust.

Opera Wonyosi is devastating, merciless satire, and the government's prompt intervention to prevent a Lagos production was proof that it had struck powerfully home. Sometimes the tone is brash, swaggering cynicism in the Brechtian mode, as in Anikura's remark that fraud by one's fellow countrymen is an infallible alibi for destitution since everyone knows "that any Nigerian will rob his starving grandmother and push her in the swamp" (*SP*, 307. Reality here seems always one step ahead of satiric invention, and the unspeakable needs little enhancement from the writer to provoke a sense of outrage. The terrorization of civilian populations by megalomaniacal military buffoons and the squalid compliance of the professional classes, cowed by a mendicant mentality,

[3] Preface to unpublished playscript of *Opera Wonyosi*. Not included in published play. The quotation is in Bernth Lindfors' article "Begging Questions in Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi*" in *Research on Wole Soyinka*, James Gibbs & Bernth Lindfors (eds.) Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1993.

[4] "Acknowledgments and Disclaimers", playbill for University of Ife production of *Opera Wonyosi*, p. 2.

were the painful Nigerian and African realities of the 1970s, and satire targeted at them walks the fine edge between the real and the surreal.

Some years later, in 1984, *A Play of Giants*, in which the playwright turns his attention to the most monstrous manifestations of power ever spawned by the African continent, is the satiric, as well as thematic sequel to *Opera Wonyosi*. But it could be regarded also as the unsparing and unforced pessimistic play he said in his fiftieth birthday speech he wished to write.[5] The pessimism, however, is expressed with a mature satiric perception. To be able to apply his satiric thrust more effectively, he explores more globally than he had ever done before. The pessimism embraces not just Soyinka's Nigerian locality or Africa, although this central, but the international world of power politics. Without losing sight of his central character Kamini (Idi Amin), the most tyrannical reprobate of them all, Soyinka surrounds him with equally power-corrupt leaders from across Africa and assembles all of them under the roof of Kamini's Bugaran Embassy in New York, overlooking the United Nations building. With this assemblage the play's satiric thrust and objective becomes focused and monumental in its efficacy.

The play is about a private conference of four notorious African dictators who are in New York for a United Nations meeting. As Soyinka admits in the preface, the four dictators are based on former leaders: Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, Emperor Jean-Baptiste Bokassa of the Central African Republic, Mobotu Sese Seko of Zaire, and Idi Amin of Uganda. The meeting is being held at the private quarters of the Embassy of the worst of the four, Kamini, modelled on Idi Amin. As the meeting progresses, the dictator becomes more and more paranoid, and, when he gets news that he has been toppled in a *coup d' état*, he takes his fellow dictators and high-ranking American and Soviet Union officials as well as the Secretary-General of the United Nations hostage. On the basis of the manner of his own ascendancy to power, he argues that it is certain that one of the superpowers has sponsored the coup and that if the two superpowers do not undo it, he will fire the guns he has already trained at the United Nations Building just opposite. When the Embassy is invaded by exiles from his country he carries out his threat.

In the first part of the play, while ostensibly sitting for a sculpture for Madame Tussaud's Exhibition, these strutting, gibbering psychopaths explain with sadistic relish how their power-hungers are satisfied, their people terrorized, and their barbaric despotisms maintained: by voodoo (Gunema), cannibalism (Tuboum), and an imperium of "pure power" (Kasco). Kamini, who has no talent for analysis, does not have to speak of power: he *is* power, in its most fearsome and ridiculous embodiment, and never ceases

[5] Looking back, on his fiftieth birthday, to earlier years in a speech given at the birthday celebration, he says: "If I were to write a truthful play at this moment, a summative reflection, no concessions, no panaceas, no forced optimism, no doctored visions, that play would be another *Madmen and Specialists*. Perhaps some of you remember the play, especially its choreic chant: As was, is, now, as ever shall be … Such pessimistic phrases, often commented upon, are no stranger to me. The circumstances which create them, being none of my own individual making, free me of any individual burden of guilt. They are real, palpable, destructively effective of the social matrix which I inhabit and, most pertinent of all, they appear to share the same properties as a recurring decimal, thwarting even the most prodigious efforts for a final beneficient resolution." "Reflections of a Member of the Wasted Generation" *Nigerian Tribune* 18 July 1984:7, p. 13.

to exercise it. The play is a succession of Kamini's psychopathic explosions, which, like those of the real Amin, arise from wilful misconceptions, the paranoid twisting of trivial offences, and pure, groundless delusions, such as his bizarre notion that the Tussaud statuettes are really life-size statues intended for the United Nations building across the road from the Embassy. When the chairman of the Bugara bank delivers himself of the sentiment that the national currency is worth toilet paper, Kamini has his head flushed repeatedly in the toilet bowl, and when the British sculptor, revealing the true destination of his work, utters the unguarded aside that its subject properly belongs in the Chamber of Horrors, Kamini has him beaten up and maimed.

There has been a gradual shift in objective from the corrupt power of Kamini to power itself as a corrupting force, which Kamini of course describes, centrally. Having firmly established the psychopathic nature of Kamini's power, Soyinka then goes on to understand it, as he tries to do in the Introduction. He dissects and analyses this power against its kindred spirits, the various guises and expressions of power. On the one hand are the grotesque recapitulations of his African leader/brothers, who not only describe the various ways they seized power (Part One) but also reflect on the different extremist ways they have enjoyed that power (Part Two). But more than this, there is a shift to another perspective – the ways Western and Eastern powers have exploited and manipulated African leaders and Africa according to their whims and interests. Thus the monstrous and dictatorial powers, like Kamini's, come to be seen as the pathological products of their colonial upbringing and the diplomatic, self-interested experiences which the super powers have "shared" with them. Truth may, in fact, lie in the frivolous abuse flaunted at Kamini's face by the Russian diplomatic officers, who describe him as an "overgrown child" or a pupil who has "more than mastered the game of his masters"[6].

Kamini is, in fact, placed in power by the British, financed by the Americans, armed by the Soviets, and finally deserted by all of them when support for insane Afican dictators is no longer in their interest. *A Play of Giants* is, to use Derek Wright's words "a surreal fantasia of international poetic justice" in which Western support systems catastrophically backfire and the monster runs out of his makers' control.

Finally it is Kasco (Bokassa) who articulates the ultimate objective of the power-hungry. He states: "Power comes only with the death of politics. That is why I choose to become emperor. I place myself beyond politics. At the moment of my coronation, I signal to the world that I transcend the intrigues and mundaneness of politics. Now I inhabit only the pure realm of power (31)."

In light of such unabashed contempt, the importance of these three plays when viewed together is that they present a universal perspective of the human condition as victimized by political demagoguery. For Soyinka then, to unmask the gods, is to demystify them, or to destroy their ambiance of power. Ultimately, his fascination with power corruption and his commitment to its exposure moves beyond power and intrigue in Africa to exposing political villainy wherever it exists.

[6] WS Plays 2, p. 66.

In an uncharacteristic almost Shavian foreword to the play *Opera Wonyosi* where Soyinka gives a general defence of satirical comedy, he asserts the comic writer's role: "Those of us who see no reason to present a utopian counter to the preponderant obscenities that daily assail our lives and, whose temporary relief is often one of "sick humour", will continue to press this line of confrontation by accurate and negative reflection, in the confidence that sooner or later, society will recognize itself in the projection and, with or without the benefit of "scientific" explications, be moved to act in its own overall self-interest[7]".

In this assertion he links up with the tradition of comedy stretching from Aristophanes through Ben Jonson and Molière to Soyinka himself. If society does not hear, it is not because the playwright is silent.

Soyinka returns to this position in *From Zia with Love*, one of his post-Nobel plays. In this play, he demonstrates his hold on and knowledge of the political situation in Nigeria. Although the setting is behind a prison bar, a metaphor for explicating the imprisonment of everyone by the despotic military class, the message is nonetheless clearly defined. Soyinka subjects both the military and religious class to ridicule. He exposes corruption in high places, uncovers man's inhumanity to man and paints the judiciary in the colors of the devil. From the promulgation of Draconian decrees to the obnoxious and unlawful detention of persons adjudged to be anti-government – all these seem to form the thread with which the drama is woven. Like Antoin Artaud, Soyinka believes that the writer must create from his heart's content and from his environment. This is aptly demonstrated in *From Zia with Love* where he draws from the knowledge of the atrocious and iniquitous rule of the Idiagbon-Buhari administration.

In a note to the reader/audience, Soyinka remarks that "the play is based on an actual event which took place in Nigeria in 1984, under the Military rule of Generals Buhari and Idiagbon". He cautions, however, that the play "is an entire product of the imagination, and makes no claim whatever to any correlation with actuality" (*FZWL*, 84). In other words, *FZWL* is not a historical document and does not pretend to be a factual account of the events of the regime of Generals Buhari and Idiagbon. Although it utilizes those events as raw ingredients of creation, the play is an artistic, verbal imitation of life. It recreates and explores the dilemmas of life in Nigeria in those difficult times.

Soyinka employs the symbol of imprisonment to express, in very strong language, the disastrous impact of that rule on the masses of the Nigerian people. *FZWL* is set in a remote prison, a penal island surrounded by hostile waters, making it impenetrable and reducing the possibility of escape to the minimum. The entire action of the play takes place between two cells: a general cell and a more exclusive one known as Cell C. The inmates of the general cell comprise of all kinds of criminals. In cell C we have three men who also engaged in drug dealing. The action of the play is woven around these men. This action is divisible into the actual and the simulated. The actual action happens in the actual time and place of the prison, while the simulated action is re-enacted by the inmates of the general cell in a "play-within-a play" mode. Through these re-

[7] W. Soyinka, Plays 1, Foreword, p. 299–300.

-enactions the playwright creates a convenient window through which the larger reality of the external world is narrated to the reader. This reality, although spatially and temporarily distanced from the prison, is highly influential in the actual time, place, and action of the prison.

The plot of the actual action is very elementary, even familiar. It is about three persons who are arrested and later executed for drug trafficking. However, they were arrested before a death penalty was placed on their crime. Thus the sentence is retroactive. In the actual time and place of the prison nothing much happens. But the prisoners narrate scenes from their pasts, and much of the play's movement depends on these re-enactions. Through multiple role-playing and incidental makeshift sceneries prisoners re-present the seedy realities of the typical African nation in the throes of military dictatorship; they project images of acts of lawlessness, manic corruption, and scenes of inhumanity. Miguel's song clearly presents the genesis of this lawlessness:

> *Power is even rottener ... But rottener than rottenest*
> *Is power that makes and breaks*
> *The very rule it makes and breaks*
> *It makes and breaks*[8].

Thus the reader is treated to all forms of disgusting images of total abuse of power. The very description of the opening scene gives the reader a literal hint of the kind of action to expect in the play. In an unmistakable allusion to Dante's Hell, a wooden board, with a crudely scrawled sign "Abandon Shame all who Enter Here" hangs over the cell-bars where these re-enactments take place and prepares the reader for a display of arrant shamelessness. Soon enough the play opens with one of the inmates, Major Awan, presenting his "curriculum vitae" which we understand within the context of the play to mean: „Name. Age. Profession. And then, most important of all wetin bring you here? What crime you commit? How much sentence they give you?[9]".

The dramatic mode of presentation of this *curriculum vitae* is remarkable. According to the "Minister of Information and Culture": "(…) in presenting your C.V., you turn it into ewi for us and recite it, or you can sing and dance it (…). Or you can preach it like a sermon (…). And last but not the least (…) you can play it for us (…). The play is our favourite of course (…)[10]".

It is through this very ingenious dramaturgy that the reader is conducted through the scenes of social and political decadence, through the ridiculous manner by which decisions are made by the people who rule over other people's lives.

Once we respond accurately to the image of the prison, it becomes fairly easy to see what Soyinka is driving at. A prison is noted for the suppression of the individual's rights. So, Nigeria is a prison because the government embarks upon measures which tend to suppress the fundamental rights of the individual, such as the freedom of speech

[8] *FZWL*, 92.
[9] *FZWL*, 98.
[10] *FZWL*, 99.

and the right to justice. Furthermore the most important right of all which every free society strives to protect is the right to life. It is the very foundation upon which all other rights rest, as only the living can claim the right to speech and justice. *FZWL* explores how the regime of General Buhari and Idiagbon violated this fundamental right of the individual. This act of violation is what Soyinka describes in the note to the reader as the "actual event" that inspired the play.

In 1984, the government of Buhari-Idiagbon promulgated "The Miscellaneous Decree", which prescribed the death penalty for a variety of crimes such as arson against public building, damage to public property, including electric cables, telephone wires, and oil pipelines and dealing in hard drugs. In pursuance of this decree, three cocaine convicts – Bartholomew Owoh, Bernard Ogedengbe, and Lawal Ojulope, all in their twenties- were executed by a military firing squad in Lagos on April 10, 1985.

By the time the execution took place, the regime of Generals Buhari and Idiagbon was already sixteen months in power; and it had clearly established itself as an arrogantly repressive and self-righteously authoritarian military dictatorship. And yet, the whole country was profoundly shaken by the execution of these three young men. Prior to this event nobody had ever been condemned to death, let alone executed for drug peddling in Nigeria. Armed robbery, murder and unsuccessful coup making were the only crimes punishable by capital punishment. "Decree 20" as it was otherwise known outraged most Nigerians by its being made retroactive to offenses committed before the promulgation of the decree. Thus, most Nigerians expected that the death sentences on these men would either be commuted to life imprisonment or reduced to a long prison term. At any rate many religious, civic and political leaders publicly appealed to the regime not to carry out the death sentence on the three men, not to implement the retroactive punitiveness of "Decree 20". These pleas were simply ignored and the men were quickly executed.

The scope of the expression of outrage which greeted this event was up till then totally unprecedented in the history of military rule in Nigeria. A former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the country described the execution of the men as "judicial murder. Equally strong condemnations were made by influential public figures like the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Lagos, the President of the Nigerian labor Congress, leaders of scores of professional associations and student's unions. But one of the most bitterly outraged statements of condemnation was issued by Soyinka in a one-page tersely-worded statement titled "Death by Retroaction". Soyinka concluded this document with the following ringing condemnation: "How can one believe that such an act could be seriously contemplated? I feel as if I have been compelled to participate in triple cold-blooded murderers, that I have been forced to witness a sordid ritual. I think, that finally, I have nothing more to say to a regime that bears responsibility for this". (There is an account of this event, together with Soyinka's role in it, in West Africa, April 22, 1985).

In view of the characters, the dramatic action and the performance idioms which give *FZWL* its frenetic energy, it would appear that if Soyinka had nothing more to say *to* the Buhari-Idiagbon regime on this event, he did have a lot to say *about* the regime to the country and the world at large in the medium of drama and in a form which both reflects and artistically transmutes the outrage which the event generated. For, in the play,

the characters representing the three condemned men, by an ingeniously parodic twist, find that the prison to which they have been brought is under the suzerainty of a "ministerial cabinet" comprising the most hardened criminals who regale the rest of the prison population with chillingly convincing mimicry of the military junta which has sent the three men to prison to await their execution. Thus, the prison reflects the nation which in turn reflects the prison.

Soyinka's play is indeed based on this incident, which he also recreates faithfully in the episode concerning the inmates of Cell C – namely, Miguel Domingo, Detiba and Emuke who are convicted and sentenced to death for drug dealing. They are imprisoned in cell C awaiting execution and in the final scenes of the play they are in fact executed.

Soyinka's view on the issue is that the drug peddlers do not deserve to die because "no one has a right to take a human life under a law which did not exist at the time of a presumed offence (93)." Their execution therefore is an act of cold-blooded murder; and it pinpoints the immoral character of the regime. Emuke makes the point clearer when he says: "All I know is dat dis na wicked country to do something like this. We know some country wey, if you steal they cut off your hand. But everybody know that in advance. So, if you steal, na your choice. Every crime get in proper punishment. But if you wait until man commit crime, then you come change the punishment, dat one na foul. Na proper foul. I no know any other country wey dat kin' ting dey happen[11]".

However, the dramatist knows what his character does not know. He knows that "this kin ting" has happened in Pakistan, where President Zia concocted a law to murder his predecessor in office, Ali Bhutto, one of the incidents from which the play derives its title. In fact, he offers a long list of global dictators. Soyinka's aim is to show that Generals Buhari and Idiagbon belong to this group because they are also murderous statesmen.

FZWL furthers and distils an argument Soyinka already began in a previous play called *A Play of Giants*. The playwrights' preoccupation is again with life and living in Africa, especially in relation to the tendentious and obnoxious rule of military despots. From Emperor Bokassa of Central African Republic through Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, Idi Amin of Uganda, Samuel Doe of Liberia to Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria, we see the same drama unfolding by the minute. We are presented with the scenario of *sit-tight rulers* who are merely interested in their personal well-being at the expense of ordinary citizens. To achieve their positions fuelled by political greed, they put in place structures which they remotely manipulate through idiotic sycophants. These miscreants are mere pawns in big hands and Soyinka uses them metaphorically to protest and portray the ever rotten situation in Africa.

Soyinka's recourse to this kind of protest does not only show his degree of alertness to developments in his society, but also it is an outright rejection of a society full of depravities. His literature then is not just a mere celebration of the agit-prop tradition but more importantly a celebration of protest. Louis James in his book *Arts and Soci-*

[11] *FZWL*, 111.

ety (1974: 109) argues this position succintly in a different situation but with the same political context in which Soyinka wrote this play: "In a situation as explosive as that of Africa today, there can be no creative literature that is not in some way political, some way protest. Even the writer who opts out of the social struggle of his country and tries to create a private world of art is saying something controversial about the responsibility of the artist to society".

James's position is no less relevant today as it was two decades ago. And crucially important is the fact that writers and commentators alike have continued, even in the face of harassment and deprivations, to hold up to society mirror-image of depravities and decadence. This enables them to give a kind of epiphanic illumination to the somewhat dull moments of life and living.

FZWL is a dramatic satire. The chief point of this work lies in the ability of the artist to blend critical attitude with humour and wit in such a way that human institutions or humanity as a whole may be improved. Like other re-known satirists, Soyinka is conscious of the frailty of institutions of man's devise, and attempts through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remolding.

Satirizing, as a macro-act, is generally face-threatening since the entity being satirized is put at some disfavour before the audience. In the play the competence face of the military rulers is threatened by the prisoners' satirical dramatization of the participation of such rulers in smuggling, their confusion and duplication of offices, and the (mis)interpretation of the goals of government to their own selfish advantage. Portrayals of military rule as being dictatorial, lacking concern for human lives, and inconsistency (as witnessed in the military changing laws when and as it likes) threaten the fellowship face of the military. Acts that threaten fellowship and competence face wants are highly alienating. The satirical play, as a mode of face-threatening, thus seems to have alienation as a covert objective. Distancing the audience from military rulership could be inferred as the goal of Soyinka in *FZWL*. The satirical play also has the rhetorical power of persuading by virtue of the verisimilitude of the image being presented. The semiotic power of the entire portrait is indeed what determines how far the attitude of the audience is influenced by the act of satirizing. And, covertly, the playwright would want to get the feelings of the audience (to what is being satirized) to agree with his.

In Nigeria which obviously is the immediate context of Soyinka's literary and critical interest, the African predicament is classic. The colonial bequeathal of geographical and political dislocations has left the country floundering hopelessly in the void of political and social afflictions. For over five decades of political independence the country still searches for a meaningful political institution which could guarantee a decent social order. Indiscipline, tyranny, injustice, starvation, political killings, human rights violations, moral decadence, lawlessness, crime, election malpractices, religious intolerance and a major civil war, mark the social history of the country. This woeful picture is perennial not because of a dearth of socially conscious voices, such as Soyinka's, but because these voices have consistently failed to pierce the concrete deafness of the institutions that be. *FZWL* is yet another volume of these voices. With this play, published

six years after the award of Nobel Prize for Literature, Soyinka displays his typical hand in caustic social and political criticism.

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