

WOLE SOYINKA'S *KONGI'S HARVEST*: A POLITICAL SATIRE

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ABSTRACT

Wole Soyinka (Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka 1934-) is the most prolific and the Africa's best known dramatist and one of its most illustrious personalities. He is the first black African writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. He deserves special consideration for making the efforts to revive the Nigerian Theatre much on the same lines as Yeats and Synge did for the revival of the Irish theatre at the beginning of the 20th century. His plays, ranging from comedy to tragedy and from political satire to the theatre of the absurd, unfold one after another, involving religion, traditionalism, myth, politics, education, economics, social taboos and so on.

In the present paper a study is made on Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*. It is a satire on the contemporary political scene prevailing at that time, attacking directly the politicians who have shaped the present direction of modern Africa. It cleverly portrays both the traditional rulers and the new political leaders.

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The world of English literature is ever growing. Apart from the English speaking countries there are other countries like West Indies, India, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya that are liberated from the colonial rule after World War II and started contributing to the growing volume of drama, poetry, and fiction to make up the world of English. The literature that comes out from such countries is commonly known as 'Commonwealth Literature' or 'New Literatures in English.'

Among these literatures, African literature occupies a special place for its vigour, vitality, and freshness. It is used as an organ of instilling social awareness and also to help in creating national consciousness. Its writing is at once a literary piece, a social protest, and a medium of political re-assertion. Some of the well-known African writers in English are Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Wole Soyinka, and others.

Wole Soyinka (Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka 1934-) is the most prolific and the Africa's best known dramatist and one of its most illustrious personalities. He is the first black African writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. He deserves special consideration for making the efforts to revive the Nigerian Theatre much on the same lines as Yeats and Synge did for the revival of the Irish theatre at the beginning of the 20th century. His early works "demonstrated his development from simple village comedies to a more complex and individual drama incorporating mime and dance."¹ His plays, ranging from comedy to tragedy and from political satire to the theatre of the absurd, unfold one after another, involving religion, traditionalism, myth, politics, education, economics, social taboos and so on. He has combined tribal myths and traditions while employing Western forms and used the devices of flashback, symbolism, and clever plot structure to enrich his dramatic style.²

He painfully attempts to reconcile the horror of personal indignation and moral anguish with the communal responsibility of the committed artist. He has made use of a variety of subject matter, continuous experimentation, what he has called 'the quest for literary forms' and held on to his major themes such as social, political, and revolutionary vision. Small wonder, therefore, that today he is a highly accomplished writer and undoubtedly the greatest of contemporary African writers. James Gibbs rightly remarks thus:

Soyinka is one of the few highly productive African authors writing in English whose works are original, creative, imaginative, and satisfying.... His imagination, vision, and craft distinguish him as a creative artist of the very first rank, as a writer of world stature.³

Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*⁴ is a satire on the contemporary political scene prevailing at that time, attacking directly the politicians who have shaped the present direction of modern Africa. It cleverly portrays both the traditional rulers and the new political leaders. The play, was, in fact, inspired by a sentence which the playwright once heard an African leader pronounce "I want him brought back, alive, if possible ... but if not ... any other way."⁵ It also grew out of Soyinka's concern with human rights and political liberties, out of his conviction that the role of political activity was an important and honourable one, out of his perception of political developments in the continent of Africa, and out of his anxiety to root his theatre in the idioms of African festival performances. Many allusions in the play refer to Nkrumah. One finds even resemblances between the character of Kongi and that of ex-president Nkrumah.

The play is a satire on the rulers of a fictitious kingdom of Isma, somewhere in Africa, during the preparations for celebrations and aftermath of a New Yam Festival. The ruler of Isma, Kongi is a repressive, ambitious autocrat, who is assisted by a ubiquitous Organizing Secretary. He is advised by a fraternity of largely sycophantic Aweris and enthusiastically supported by a brutal carpenters' Brigade. He has put some of his most powerful opponents, including Oba Danlola, into detention and wants to usurp Danlola's position. Specifically he wants to receive the New Yam from the Oba's hands and present himself to the people as their protector and spiritual leader and acknowledge his supremacy. His rule is challenged by his ex-mistress Segi, by her female supporters and by Daodu, Danlola's nephew, his leader of a successful farming cooperative. Danlola is unwilling to abdicate his religious functions but Segi and Daodu want Danlola to pretend to cooperate so as to draw Kongi to the public celebration. They plan to assassinate Kongi in this public celebration. However their assassination attempt fails and Segi's father is killed instead. Kongi is shocked after learning about the conspiracy and chases away Daodu and Segi. The implications are that Kongi's rule asserts itself more repressively than ever. Soyinka, thus, brings out the conflict between a traditional ruler and tribal chief and a megalomaniac dictator.

The play is divided into four sections namely Hemlock, First Part, Second Part, and Hangover. The first section 'Hemlock' serves as a Prologue to the play. We are told that Oba Danlola shoulders a heavily responsibility of saving the state and its people from the tyrannical rule of Kongi. Suggesting poison and anarchy in Ismland, it foreshadows the political instability and social disorder. The satirical version of the national anthem shows that the people in a state of Ismland are not happy and are terribly afraid of Kongi's regime. If 'Hemlock' is a kind of prologue then 'Hangover', the last section of the play serves as an Epilogue to balance the happenings in Ismland. Probably this is meant to comfort the audience who receive a shock at the end of the play.

'Hemlock,' the opening section, is a thematic microcosm of the whole play. Indeed much of what a thematic analysis of the play eventually yields is summarized in the three images which open the satirical anthem at the beginning of the play:

The pot that will eat fat
Its bottom must be scorched
The squirrel that will long crack nuts
Its footpad must be sore
The sweetest wine has flowed down
The tapper's shattered shins. (61)

The first two images contain the idea that every desirable end exacts its price. This applies not only to Kongi's self imposed Herculean assignment as Oyin Ogunba suggests but also to the equally Herculean task of trying to unseat him, a task which ends in disaster, thus exacting its price without the satisfaction of achieving the end. This last idea is reiterated in the third image. In mockery of the taper's efforts – 'his shattered shins' – the sweetest wine has flowed uselessly away.

Even the satirical opening of the play has obliquely presented in imagery a situation of fruitless labour. The jingling anthem goes on further to portray the prevailing political situation. The new regime built on new political theories – the isms of Ismland – has contemptuously displaced the old:

To demonstrate the tree of life
Is sprung from broken peat
And we the rotted bark, spurned
When the tree swells its pot
The mucus that is snorted out
When Kongi's new race blows. (61)

The anthem is satirical and ironic. The old regime portrays itself in the words which the 'new race' would use. Oba Danlola repeats this style of ironical self-mockery frequently in the play.

The new regime depends for its continuance on its own propaganda; the 'government loud speaker' is thus central to its political machinery. In Ismland this is a device which pours out propaganda but admits no reply – even if reply were worthwhile; 'My ears are sore/But my mouth is agbayun' (62). This tyranny of words is later given physical shape in the Reformed Aweri Fraternity which in its isolated word-factory, manufactures the words which go into the talking boxes. The satirical anthem silently comments on the value of such words – the very repetition of 'words' throughout the anthem effectively devalues their worth. When the Reformed Aweri appears and is seen in conclave, actually producing the words to order, the devaluation of the coinage becomes complete.

The Hemlock section also suggests that a heavy responsibility accompanies the Oba's exalted position in the minds of the people. It shows Danlola, the leader, in detention under the old dispensation has been placed behind barbed wire by the new. The Khaki uniforms and detention camp regulations speak volumes about Kongi's regime and by showing us these things Soyinka saves hundreds of words. The Oba's poetic, musical, richly dressed retinue, vivacious despite Danlola's captivity places before the audience an image of the old order 'in durance vile.' Danlola himself is warm, witty, mischievous, dignified: Soyinka has made him sympathetic, while refusing to sentimentalize him.

In the course of section, there is a moment of particular tension when, in the middle of a praise song for Danlola, the Superintendent seizes the lead drummer by the wrist and everything stops. After a pause, and in the complete silence which follows, Danlola asks with great deliberation: 'You stopped the royal drums?' The interruption of the ceremonies of the Oba is not, Danlola makes clear, the first, nor will it be the last. Indeed, it looks back to the imprisoning of Danlola and anticipates both the bursting of Danlola's drum by Daodu and the interruption of the New Yam festival.

'Hemlock' also portrays Kongi as a monster which should have been scotched before it achieved its full proportions, one parable makes the point:

Ogbo Aweri: Observe, when the monster child
Was born, Opele taught us to
Abandon him beneath the butters tree
But the mother said, oh no,
A child is still a child
The mother in us said, a child
Is still the handiwork of Olukori

Sarumi: Soon the head swelled
Too big for pillow
And it swelled too big for mother's back
And soon the mother's head
Was nowhere to be seen
And the child's slight belly
Was strangely distended. (68-69)

The monster child Kongi to whom this parable is applicable has become by slow degrees and, ironically through the merciful indulgence of his mother-land, the smothered, and the destroyer of his country.

Kongi parodies modern megalomaniacs who having been addicted to the irresistible taste of power and its accompanying stature and prestige start monopolizing all its symbols and roles. This attains such heights bordering on deification at a reformed Aweri session. The members propose that they be recognized as the Magi as that would lead automatically to Kongi's apotheosis. Then considering himself to Christ, Kongi wants his name along with the forthcoming harvest festival to mark the beginning of a new calendar with everything else dating from it. His quest for monopolizing everything in the state leads him to equating himself to God. For he wants his name to mark the start of a new calendar, in the same way Christ's does the Christian calendar. State bodies therefore work hard towards elevating their leader to godhead. The Reformed Aweri therefore proposes as a first step their recognition as the Magi. And the praise song of the Carpenter's brigade compares Kongi to Christ by calling him a saviour whom they will sweat endlessly for:

For Kongi is our father
And Kongi is our man
Kongi is our mother
Kongi is our man
And Kongi is our Saviour
Redeemer, prince of power
For Isms and for Kongi
We're proud to live or die! (116)

So much does it become that Danlola cries out in disgust:
Will there not be six times
At the least when we must up and bow
To Kongi? (107)

Kongi's image boosting is directed at impressing the outside world. He thus creates an attractive coat to hide his monstrous form inside. In it he poses in a wide range of postures for

the foreign correspondents to paint a glowing portrait of him abroad. Such captivating captions all add up into the desired effect.

Kongi could be seen as representing the modern paranoid dictator. Instead of being a procreative force he engenders and spreads destruction, decapitating his opponents and showing no genuine interest in the fertility rites of the soil and of the flesh. Thus in Hemlock he is regarded as a monster which should have been scorched before it achieved its full destructive proportions. Kongi thus clearly demonstrates his repugnance towards creating a better future for his people. He rather creates an illusion of personal as well as national well-being to the outside world and the gullible fools within. Through biting satire Soyinka registers his distaste for such ugly aspects of modern societies in Africa.

The presentation of Kongi and his henchmen is a biting satire of the modern dictators in Africa as well as elsewhere. The composite picture is almost that of a madman. For after all, all dictatorships border on madness. The dictator, Kongi maintains total control over all the instruments of coercion that are in fact the lifeblood and modus operandum of all modern dictatorships. These instruments of coercion are well established and manifested in the mallet-swinging Carpenter Brigade and in the Superintendent who tyrannizes over the Oba. Their repressiveness is a constant source of concern for the Oba as is evident in his speech:

Their yam is pounded, not with the pestles
But with stamp and a pad of violet ink
And their arms make omelet of
Stubborn heads, via police truncheons. (109)

And this is confirmed in the words of their anthem:

We spread the creed of Kongism
To every son and daughter
And heads too slow to learn it
Will feel our mallets' weight.

On stage they are supposed to be dehumanized beings with stiff mallet-wielding arms pistoning up in the Nazi-salute. They are in this way presented as the coercive instruments of a totalitarian regime such as Kongi's that perpetuates its rule mainly through the use of sheer force. Its repressiveness has become so entrenched in the society that when on his return from prison, Oba Danlola finds the outside world worse than even the prison. Frequent incidences of bomb-throwing thus become the normal fare. And as is characteristic of all dictatorships, the culprits or suspects are quickly apprehended in readiness to be hanged.

Kongi has the power but wants the spirituality, which is inherent in the Obaship. With the Oba's surrender of the New Yam, continuity would have been established between the new regime and the traditional predecessor. He is presented as an intensification of the tyranny of the traditional regime. But Kongism is also a decisive break with the past. Kongi's ascendancy spells the doom of tradition itself. His order 'to replace' the old superstitious festival by a state ceremony governed by the principle of 'Enlightened Ritualism' means the destruction of what is authentically Africa. The life of the state will henceforth reflect the austere and joyless personality of its ruler. As Oba Danlola's drummer sings:

This is the last
Our feet shall touch together
we thought the tune
obeyed us to the soul

But the drums are newly shaped
and stiff-arms strain
on stubborn crooks, so
delve with the left foot
for ill-luck; once more
with the left alone, for disaster
is the only certainty we know. (66)

Oba Danlola, sad, living in poverty, is still surrounded by a remnant of his faithful people. His only resistance to the new state is that he and his followers sing a satirical version of the National Anthem and he wears the national flag under his robes. However, he retains the fire when he speaks sarcastically to the guard:

Good friend, you merely stopped
my drums. But they were silenced
on the day when Kongi set aside
my props of wisdom, the day he
drove the old Aweri from their seats
what is a king without a clan of Elders? (63)

Kongi wants to project an image of having made a clean break from the past. Only the fifth Aweri (wise men) is cynical about everything. When the fourth Aweri says that they might consider a scientific image and the third Aweri refers to the last publication, the fifth Aweri spews out:

Ah yes. No proverbs, only ideograms in algebraic quantum. If the square of xqy (zbc) equals QA into the square root of $X1$ then the progressive forces must prevail once the reactionary in the span of 32 of a single generation. (13)

Here, Soyinka is undoubtedly being satirical about Nkrumah, particularly Nkrumah's consciencism where he tries to create a new postcolonial philosophy and rest his philosophy on the foundation of mathematical formulae! Just as it was alleged that others wrote Nkrumah's books for him, in this play it is the Aweris who write books for Kongi. Of more importance is the fact that words like 'progressive' and 'reactionary' are shown to be totally meaningless as used by Kongi's advisers. These words hide the reality of a terrible demagogic, corrupt and soulless dictatorship.

Kongi's advisers are all corrupt. As the secretary says, corruption is not only the naked acquisition of wealth at all costs. When accused by the Aweri of being corrupt, he retaliates by accusing them of corruption:

I know the sight of cash is printed over with INSULT for upright men like you and intellectual minds. On no, not cash. But position. Yes position! And the power of being so close to power. Well its difficult but I'll see what I can do! You understand, my private feelings cannot come into this but that's the position ... Bribe with the bribe of an all-powerful signature across a timeless detention order. (26-27)

It seems Kongi is a composite of the worst aspects of Banda and Nkrumah. The desire for fame, for praise as an intellectual, the craving to be hero-worshipped, the refusal to brook any opposition, the desire almost to be built up into a god ... And the people closest to him give him exactly what he wants for their own ends. In the end, dissidents plan to assassinate Kongi.

However, the assassination attempt fails and the dissidents are killed immediately. Segi presents Kongi with mutilated head of Segi's father instead of the New Yam. The shock of being confronted by the actual results of his cruelty paralyses Kongi and throws all into confusion.

The play abounds with traditional expressions, masquerades, rituals, dirge, praise singing, dance, mask, tradition, the Yoruban Yam festival and the New Year Festival. Though the play is very powerful with all the rich elements, the problem with the play is its ending which leaves the reader confused as to the fate of the protagonists and the state of affairs after the coup. It is also leaves the reader no hope for the purging of such societies. The struggle by Daodu and others to overcome Kongi's destruction is doomed. Even Segi who is courageous enough to openly condemn Kongi's rule, is in the end victim of the predicted general clampdown indicated by the iron granting that clamps on the ground at the end of the play. Kongi's secretary is seen heading for the border, indicating that all is not well in Kongi's camp. When Danlola enters, he talks of spending the rest of his life in exile, and mentions that Sarumi has gone to abduct Daodu and to forcibly parcel him across the border. This indicates that there is a problem in Daodu's camp. However, the idea of forcing Daodu suggests that he may not be willing to leave and that he may also have other plans. So, if we may repeat Danlola's questions to the Secretary we are left thinking: What happens now? ... What happens to the sleeping world? Thus, Soyinka's political vision which was established earlier in the play doesn't emerge in clearly at the end.

To conclude, *Kongi's Harvest* is the most proverb-riddled play and is probably significant that it deals with African politics. It pins down perfectly the kind of cruel, paranoid black dictatorship that is apparently new to the experience of Africa. It is a black comedy hardening on satire. Through this play Soyinka was giving vent to his hatred of the whole system in Africa. According to him, Kongi is not Nkrumah or anyone else but a combination of the repressive, anti-life propensities, with certain aspects of a breed of leaders.

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