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Understanding Leadership and Post-Colonial Power Struggles in Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* and *A Play of Giants*

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Abstract

This paper explores the post-colonial power struggles in Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* and *A Play of Giants*. Both plays address the theme of authoritarian leadership in newly independent African nations, emphasizing power and misuse of power by leaders who mirror their colonial predecessors. In *Kongi's Harvest*, General Kongi's efforts to control both political and cultural authority reflect the tension between tradition and modernity in post-colonial governance. Similarly, *A Play of Giants* satirizes African dictators who, while detached from their people's suffering, maintain power through violence, manipulation, and foreign support. The plays also highlight the enduring influence of neo-colonial powers, showing how post-colonial rulers rely on external forces to secure their authority. Through these themes, Soyinka explores the failures of post-colonial leadership and exposes the ongoing struggle for genuine independence and justice in Africa.

Keywords: Power struggles, authoritarianism, corruption, neo-colonialism, African leadership, resistance, cultural authority, Dictators

Introduction

Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian playwright and Nobel laureate, is celebrated for his sharp critique of political and social issues in Africa. His plays *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) and *A Play of Giants* (1984) tackle the struggles faced by African nations after gaining independence. These plays reveal how leaders who once fought for freedom often become authoritarian, behaving much like the colonial rulers they replaced. In *Kongi's Harvest*, General Kongi tries to take over a traditional harvest festival to consolidate his political power, showcasing the clash between traditional authority and modern political ambitions. Meanwhile, *A*

Play of Giants uses satire to portray corrupt and oppressive African dictators modeled after real leaders. These rulers use fear and manipulation to stay in power, often with the backing of foreign forces. Together, these plays reflect the challenges of leadership in post-colonial Africa, where the promise of independence is undermined by power struggles and exploitation.

Wole Soyinka's plays *Kongi's Harvest* and *A Play of Giants* both focus on the theme of power struggles in post-colonial African nations. They highlight how leadership in these countries is shaped by authoritarianism, corruption, and the lasting impact of colonialism. While both plays discuss similar issues, they do so in different ways, giving us a deeper look at leadership and authority after colonialism.

“KASCO. Ants, ants, what they understand? Gnawing away at the seat of power.
Flies, flies, what they care anyway? Buzzing around the red meat of power. The
red blood attracts them, but what they do with the meat? Nothing. They lay maggots,
the meat fester.” (Soyinka p56)

In *A Play of Giants*, Wole Soyinka uses humor and satire to depict African dictators who have absolute control over their countries, ruling through fear and violence. The characters Kamini, Gunema, Tuboum, and Kasco are exaggerated representations of real-life dictators. Kamini, for example, is modeled after Uganda's Idi Amin, infamous for his brutal reign. While these characters are satirical, they reflect the grim reality of postcolonial African leaders who, after achieving independence, often turned into oppressive rulers. Instead of uplifting their people, they maintained power through the same tactics of intimidation and violence used by colonial regimes. Kamini stands out as a character obsessed with power. He shows no regard for democratic values and sees his rule as absolute and unquestionable. This mirrors a broader postcolonial pattern, where the fight for freedom from colonial rule often gave way to internal oppression, with leaders exercising unchecked authority and no accountability to their people.

Similarly, in *Kongi's Harvest*, General Kongi displays traits of a dictator, seeking total control over the people of Isma. His leadership relies on manipulation, authoritarianism, and a complete disregard for democratic principles. Kongi's character embodies the harsh oppression often associated with tyrannical rulers. He uses coercion to suppress opposition and even justifies brutal acts, such as executions, as a form of "scientific exorcism." His desire to replace Oba Danlola as the one to partake in the symbolic New Yam Festival is a clear attempt to elevate himself to a godlike status. He claims to embody the "Spirit of Harvest," demanding unwavering loyalty. Both Kongi and the dictators are not content with controlling just the political systems of their nations; they also aim to dominate cultural traditions. These plays highlight how postcolonial African leaders often mimic the oppressive strategies of their colonial predecessors, demonstrating the dangers of absolute power.

Soyinka also explores the corrupting influence of power through the actions and attitudes of the dictators in the play. The characters are depicted as being detached from the realities of their people's suffering, focusing instead on consolidating personal wealth and international prestige. They are more concerned with how they are perceived on the global stage than with the well-being of their citizens. In *A Play of Giants*, the leaders are shown as highly corrupt, more interested in getting rich and gaining international fame than in helping their people. Their rule is brutal, and they exploit their citizens for personal benefit. These dictators also use foreign aid and international relationships to their advantage, showing how their thirst for power corrupts them not only at home but globally as well.

“KAMINI. Yes, it is beginning to make sense. First, the World Bank refuse common loan. Then that Secretary-General! Kamini is never wrong. I know it from moment he arrive after we have finish eating, when we were picking our teeth and there is nothing left in the pot but bones.” (Soyinka ,81)

The play Kongi's Harvest also shows how corruption is a common problem. The Theme of power struggles and corruption are closely connected to the history of Nigeria after it gained independence from colonial rule. The play explores how the newly independent nation grapples with leadership issues, mirroring the struggles and corrupt practices that were prevalent under colonial rule.

The power struggle between Kongi and Oba Danlola represents the clash between traditional and modern forms of authority. Kongi, the modern dictator, seeks to supplant the traditional ruler, Oba Danlola, by demanding the symbolic New Yam from him. This struggle highlights the tension in post-colonial societies between preserving traditional governance structures and adopting new political systems. Kongi's rule is full of dishonest and immoral actions, just like the way the colonial rulers used to behave. Kongi pretends to be a simple and selfless leader in public, but secretly he controls and mistreats people. This shows how leaders after independence often say one thing but do the opposite, which is a common problem. Kongi is so desperate to stay in power that he manipulates traditions and uses force to reach his political goals. Although his methods might seem more subtle than the brutal tactics in *A Play of Giants*, the corruption is just as deep. Both plays highlight how post-colonial leaders often use their positions of authority to serve their own interests, creating a system where power is abused without any accountability.

Though the play focuses on African dictators, it also critiques the role of Western powers in maintaining these authoritarian regimes. The postcolonial states in *A Play of Giants* are not truly independent; they are still subject to the influence of global institutions like the United Nations and foreign governments. In *A Play of Giants*, Soyinka focuses on the concept of neo-colonialism, which means that even though the dictators have control over their countries, they still depend on Western nations for financial and military support. This creates a situation where these dictators maintain power through violence at home, but rely on foreign countries to keep their position, showing that their power is not truly independent.

“KONGI: The Spirit of Harvest has smitten the enemies of Kongi. The justice of earth has prevailed over traitors and conspirators. There is divine blessing on the second Five- Year Development Plan. The spirit of resurgence is cleansed in the blood of the nation's enemies, my enemies, the enemies of our collective spirit, the Spirit of Planting, the Spirit of Harvest, The Spirit of Inevitable History and Victory, all of which I am. Kongi is every Ismite, and Ismite.... [shoots out a clenched fist.]” (Soyinka 81)

Kongi's Harvest also touches on neo-colonialism, Kongi, the dictator, embodies the neo-colonial leader who mimics the authoritarian practices of the colonial regime. Despite the country's independence, Kongi's leadership style is marked by the same harsh and controlling way that the colonial rulers did. but in a more subtle way. Kongi's struggle for legitimacy reflects the larger problem of trying to balance traditional practices with the modern political systems that were left behind by colonial powers. While Kongi tries to modernize his country, his way of ruling echoes the control that colonial rulers once had, showing how post-colonial leaders can unknowingly repeat the same power dynamics. Both plays show that even after colonial rule ends, African nations still deal with power systems that are influenced by outside forces, whether through direct interference or because of the lasting effects of colonialism.

In *Kongi's Harvest*, Traditional practices and symbols, such as the New Yam Festival, serve as anchors of cultural identity. These customs represent continuity and communal values that have defined the society for generations. However, the post-colonial push towards modernization often entails undermining these traditions in favor of new political ideologies and structures.

“KONGI: Tell you what. You get all the leaders of the dissident groups to appear on the dais with me tomorrow all of them, and at their head, that wretched king himself and his entire court, bearing the new yam in his hands. Right? You get him to do that. Him at the head of all the opposing factions. Well? Is there anything else?” (Soyinka 39)

one of the central conflicts is between political power and traditional authority, embodied by the struggle between Kongi and Oba Danlola. Kongi's efforts to control the harvest festival, a traditional ceremony, reflect his desire to usurp not only political power but also cultural legitimacy. This clash between modern political leadership and traditional cultural practices is a key theme in the play, showing how post-colonial leaders often attempt to undermine or co-opt indigenous authority to legitimize their own rule.

In contrast, *A Play of Giants* does not directly engage with traditional authority, But Kamini and his fellow African leaders in the play often embody the internal conflict between embracing traditional African values and adopting Western cultural norms. The dictators, in their quest for power, often distance themselves from their cultural roots. They adopt superficial aspects of Western culture while ignoring the

deeper values and traditions of their own societies. as the dictators in the play have already fully dismantled or sidelined any pre-colonial structures of power. However, the absence of traditional authority in *A Play of Giants* can be seen as a reflection of how modern African dictators often seek to erase or diminish the influence of cultural and traditional leaders, just as Kongi attempts to do in *Kongi's Harvest*. In both plays, the struggle between political and cultural authority is a significant aspect of post-colonial power dynamics, with leaders seeking to replace or control traditional forms of leadership to maintain their dominance.

Resistance to authoritarian rule is a theme that runs through both plays, though it manifests in different ways. In "*A Play of Giants*," the people are largely absent, and we only know they are being mistreated by the way the dictators behave. The dictators live in a world that has nothing to do with the people they rule, but the play suggests that their power is weak and only exists because they are supported by other countries. In *Kongi's Harvest*, resistance is more visible. Characters like Daodu and Segi represent different forms of opposition to Kongi's rule. Daodu, the younger generation, resists Kongi's attempts to control him, while Segi symbolizes popular discontent. Through these characters, Soyinka explores how the oppressed can resist authoritarian rule, even when it appears unassailable. Both plays suggest that while authoritarian regimes may seem powerful, they are inherently unstable, as they are built on coercion rather than genuine popular support.

Conclusion

Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* and *A Play of Giants* share a thematic concern with the power struggles of post-colonial leadership, critiquing the authoritarianism, corruption, and neo-colonial entanglements that characterize many African regimes. Through satirical and symbolic representations of power, Soyinka illustrates how post-colonial leaders often replicate the oppressive systems of their colonial predecessors. Both plays also emphasize the fragility of authoritarian power and the potential for resistance, offering a complex portrayal of leadership in post-colonial Africa.

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