



IGBINEDION UNIVERSITY OKADA
JOURNAL OF ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES



<https://jels@iuokada.edu.ng>

Vol.1, no. 1, pp. 32-41 (2024)

**The Role of Satire in Troubled Nigeria: Its Sociological Imperatives in Wole Soyinka's
*Alapata Apata***

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Abstract

Satire as a literary art is a deliberate, humourous diminishing of a subject to the end that a shift from the ridiculous to a shared norm is attained. The foregoing implies that the sociological complexion of satire requires that social change remains its nexus. Furthermore, the post-independence Nigerian literary engagements bespeak of a traumatising amalgam of socio-political ills, ranging from leadership failure to sit-tight syndrome and misgovernance. This paper derives direction from the way in which Soyinka reacts to the manifold socio-political decay in Nigeria by deploying satire as a tool for social criticism. The findings reveal that Soyinka presents his targeted characters as intellectually hollow and politically arid, relying heavily on the satiric devices of symbolism, ironies, humour and wit, and historical allusion to expose socio-political decay, conscientise his audience, and instigate social change that will revision society.

Keywords: satire, misgovernance, social criticism, social change, revision

Introduction

To say that Nigeria is a nation of irreparable tragedies is to be at home with the aptly presented threnody of Professor Tekena Tamuno, a cerebral academic prophet, who during his valedictory lecture at the University of Ibadan once said: "All things bright and beautiful. All creatures great and small. All things wise and wonderful, Nigerians kill them all." No doubt, Tamuno's statement inheres from the cataclysmic nosedive of the political class into meaninglessness and sworn irresponsibility, all of which has further killed the hope for a better tomorrow. Indeed, Nigeria's sociopolitical narrative is one fraught with disheartening realities, and it is these realities that have furnished satire, as a literary vocation, with the much-needed materials for creativity. As E. O. Okwechime puts it, "Wherever there is bad governance, the appropriate tool for a literary explication is satire"(5). The foregoing submission hinges on the sociological colouration of satire. In other words, society shapes satiric literature, and satiric literature shapes society in turn. By way of illustration, the Nigerian society, like any other society of the world, is characterised by multiple

colourations of historical experiences. This implies that the Nigerian society undergoes constant changes due to the interplay of positive, negative, external, or internal forces, which combine to weave its social fabric. Since every writer is first a product of this ever changing, ever evolving society, there exists a mutual relationship between society and satiric literature, which is created by social beings in the first place. Thus, in an ever changing society such as Nigeria bedeviled with political, economic, religious, and social ills, satiric literature, particularly satiric drama, remains the most veritable tool in explicating the ambivalence which defines its trajectory. It is on this note the study concludes that Soyinka's *Alapata Apata* is a satiric commentary on the nagging sociopolitical realities of the Nigerian nation, to the end that social change may be inspired and actualised.

Satire as a Literary Art

Gbemisola Adeoti labels satire as “a socially sanctioned medium of expressing the communal purgative will” (162). The foregoing conception of satire and indeed all other conceptions of the term attest to its sociological conditioning. For example, Niyi Akingbe defines satire as “the act of using humor or exaggeration to critique society” (183). Adenigbo and Alugbin conceive satire to be a means through which “the prevailing irregularities and moral excesses of a person, a group of people, a race, an institution or even a nation are exposed to ridicule” (321).

Taiwo O. Abioye opines that an object is criticised because “it falls short of some standard which the critic desires that it should reach” (138). The perception that the satirist does a comparison between the object of ridicule and a certain expected standard is germane to satire as a literary style or vocation. Ngugi wa Thiong’o corroborates the foregoing when he explains that the “satirist sets himself certain standards and criticizes society when and where it departs from these norms” (qtd. in Akingbe 183). Nevertheless, Adeoti asserts that the tendency to satirise is a basic impulse of man, adding that satire has a place “alongside formal legal means” (160). In other words, the satirist plays a role very akin to law enforcement agencies as he holds up an erring person(s) or institution(s) before some communally shared norms in a bid to deride when and where there is a departure from such shared norms. Thus, Darah holds the view that the satirist can be seen in no better light than that of a defender of communal norms and virtues (Akingbe 183). Okafor Stella Ogonna argues that if drama imitates life on stage, then satiric drama ridicules abuses for the sake of remedying them (3). It goes without saying that satire is a ridiculous but subtly aggressive explication of man’s excesses be they political, religious, economic or social with the aim of inspiring remedies. Since man is a social being, the point needs no reiteration that society remains the most authentic canvas upon which the satirist explicates the manifold oddities that define existence.

Contrary to Adrian Roscoe’s opinion that “satire...has not enjoyed a long history in Africa” (qtd. in Adeoti 160), Adeoti argues that researchers have “confirmed its existence in the artistic-cum-ritual performances of traditional societies in Africa” (160). The point is, if the tendency to satirise is a basic impulse of man, if satire ridicules man’s excesses within a social milieu, and man has not been found to exist outside society, then it is incontrovertibly correct that no society, having been thoroughly investigated, should be found without some measure of a satiric corpus. As a matter of illustration, satire featured predominantly in the songs, dance, mime poetry and story-telling of the pre-colonial Yoruba society, and the Udje dance songs of the Urhobo people amongst others. In fact, the place of satire in the indigenous Nigerian society is further validated bearing in mind that satire was one of the means through which the erring individual was nudged back to

sanity. Consequently, members of society were often kept in line through the deployment of this dramatic device since there were no formal legal means at that time.

The pre-independent Nigerian society witnessed the use of satire in its interrogation of the colonial hegemony as well as the consequences that ensued in the prejudiced clash between the culture of the West and those of the Nigerian. Integral to that literary epoch was the need to advocate self-determination from colonial grips by pointing satirically to the jaundiced perception of the colonial system as it pertained to Nigeria and Africa in general. Apart from deriding the self-imposed superiority complex of the colonialist, the satiric thrust of the era derided Nigerians and Africans who abandoned their cultures for those of the West. Other thematic focuses of the time were the unbridled corruption of urban life and the unstable lifestyle of city-dwellers in comparison with the naturally calm, rustic lifestyle of country folks. The major contribution of satire to that era was that it formed the creative nuances of the Nigerian and the African nationalists in general as they spoke and wrote against colonialism. The works of African nationalists like Dennis Osadebay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Kwame Nkrumah to mention but a few were imbued with weighty satiric ingredients that occasioned the independence of Nigeria as well as other African nations from colonial hegemony at different times in history.

The focus of satire in post-independent Nigeria is leadership failure and the quest of political leaders to hold on to power tenaciously. The nationalists' demand for independence was inspired by the thought that the Nigerian nation was ripe enough for self-determination. The underlying current was that the nation was well endowed with visionary leaders who would take the nation to the Canaan of dreams. However, the attainment of independence was pummeled by trauma and disillusionment. Leadership failure became a common denominator, not just in Nigeria, but in all African nations. Chinua Achebe, the literary pundit, identifies leadership failure as Nigeria's trouble and explicates further that the problem of Nigeria is "the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership" (qtd. in Ugbor 21). Although Achebe has Nigeria in focus, yet his diagnosis also holds true for the entire sick fabric that is called Africa. Therefore, the fact needs no reiteration that the historical odyssey of postcolonial Nigeria is dominated by the banality of power, which is not different from the unbridled quest of political brutes to flaunt power in such a manner that it hinders development, enthrones fascism, and institutionalises corruption. The foregoing is the prismatic compass from which modern Nigerian writers, particularly satirist-dramatist, engage their works in a continued but daunting interrogation of societal affairs.

Critical Opinions on the Text

Soyinka's works have received and continue to receive very extensive critical appraisal. Although *Alapata Apata* is a recent play, yet critics have also examined it with vigour. Samuel Adebayo Omotunde and Samuel Oyeyani Agbeleoba investigate the various functions that universal emotive interjections such as "oh" and "ah" perform in an extended literary discourse using Wole Soyinka's *Alapata Apata* as a case study. They also examine language specific interjections such as "Haba", "Yeeparipa", and "Yee" as language and culture specific interjections. They conclude that "oh" and "ah" can perform additional emotive and informative functions of "desperation, disappointment or lack of interest and caution or warning" (89) in a manner that may have not been done before.

Also, Innocent Sourou Koutchade sets out to determine the extent to which the text in question has been influenced by the playwright's culture and mother tongue. His argument hinges

on the fact that on a sociolinguistic level, the playwright has deployed pidgin, code-switching, code-mixing and several other linguistic devices as examples of Interlingua features to represent his artistic and ideological perspective of African literature (116). His analyses of the mood-types reveal “the tenor variables in each text” (130). The critic concludes that the use of declaratives, interrogatives and imperatives “combined with features of modality determine the power, contact and affective relationships existing among the participants of the four communicative events” (131).

Elijah Adeoluwa Olusegun examines the deployment of humour in the play, conceptualising the protagonist (Alaba) as a theatrical re-enactment of Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala), the Alawada. He argues that the play deviates from Soyinka's other comedies in that the theatrical essence, the humourous dimension of the play inheres from the interplay between tone and meaning in the Yoruba Language. He believes that in spite of the humorous or comic content of the text, the play does not “shy away from political undertones and satires” (127), adding that there are references to real social events as well as indirect jokes at corrupt politicians.

Similarly, Nurayn Fola Alimi seeks to interpret the text as a social craft. Interrogating the relationship between imaginative literature and humanistic geography, he argues that the text is the playwright's latest creative effort at using satiric drama to x-ray “the lopsidedness in the global, social, economic, moral, cultural and political landscape, using the Nigerian experience as a specific context” (2).

However, this study deviates from the above as it attempts to show that Soyinka presents his targeted characters as intellectually hollow and politically arid, relying heavily on satiric devices to expose unsavory sociopolitical decay, conscientise his audience, and instigate social change that will revision society.

Sociopolitical Issues in the Play

A significant portion of Soyinka's artistic engagements derives impetus from the politics of Nigeria and the third world countries as a whole. In other words, as a committed playwright, political satire remains a vital aspect of Soyinka's artistry. In *Alapata Apata*, he deploys various shades of symbols, ironies, humour and wit, and historical allusion to deride sociopolitical ills as a sad aspect of the Nigerian condition.

Characters as Symbol

General, Daanielebo and Alaba are three major symbolic characters in the play. For instance, General is symbolic of military dictatorship, arrogance, and the mentor-mentoree link of corruption between the military and democratic eras. Daanielebo is a symbol of corrupt civilian leaders who have lost touch with vision for positive change. His unwillingness to initiate change, however tiny it might be, is summed up in Teacher's view of him as “our very own local exemplar of nothing” (43). As a one-time mentoree of General, Daanielebo learnt everything about thievery from him, a knowledge he now claims to have improved upon. Also, Alaba is symbolic of modesty and honesty. It is his sense of propriety that provides the backdrop upon which the insensitivity of many political leaders and their addiction to office is fundamentally satirised. The realisation that a butcher could recognise when to retire having served and profited from butchering for many years further heightens Soyinka's satiric mission in the text.

In summary, the playwright, through the first two characters (General and Daanielebo), argues that the fate of Nigeria under civilian rule is not different from what was obtainable in the draconian military regimes. Thus, Soyinka weighs the civilian and military leaders in a literary

balance and finds them culpable of institutionalised corruption, lack of vision, and sit-tight dispositions, using Alaba's modesty and honesty as a contrast to further heighten his criticism.

Nudity as Symbol

Soyinka also deploys nudity as an emblem to deride the hollowness and aridity of Daanielebo, which by extension, lampoons the moral vacuity of corrupt Nigerian political leaders. A very good example is when Daanielebo confronts Alaba over the quarry believed to house rare mineral deposits, to which the latter feigns (in Daanielebo's own evaluation) complete ignorance. The playwright describes the entire process thus:

Daanielebo's strip-tease continues – cap, agbada, buba, shoes, trousers, underpants and now even the underpants are coming off, revealing a full armoury of grenades, gas canisters, pistols and a “bante” made of fresh leaves, covering the front only, exposing bare buttocks. Amulets, sheathed knives encase his arms from wrist to shoulder. A juju necklace, leg charms etc etc. he stands revealed, a human cornucopia of medicine gourds, phials leaf wrap, silver cross, etc The Okada trio takes to flight. (141)

The allegorical significance of the above scene is such that it reaffirms Hodgkiss White's assertion that “The Greeks used nakedness for the purpose of degradation, the phylax... shows god and heroes, Zeus and Oedipus ludicrously undressed with erect phalluses. Nakedness reduces man from god-like to animal” (Okwechime 10). Man, except for infants and the insane, is the only animal with the natural inclination to hide his nakedness from the glare of the public: lower animals do not have that in-born capacity. The implication of Daanielebo's nudity as evident in the above allegorical purview is that, he has crashed from the pedestal of a responsible adult to an animal, an insane person, or a child that is not ashamed to be seen naked. Furthermore, what his symbolic configuration portends for the Nigerian political space is best left for the imagination! For when that time comes when the sane are led by the insane or when adults are led by children, then that specie of human race has come to the end of civilisation, and now plays host to fascism and primordial primitivism! Such is the daily lot of Nigeria as a nation, where many parading themselves as political leaders are disappointingly flaunting their hollowness and aridity.

Music as Symbol

Music is another form of symbol deployed in the text. Soyinka draws from Fela Anikulapo Kuti's “Zombie” lyrics to satirise General and Major's hollowness. Fela had sung that song to ridicule the intellectual shallowness of the military men; their inability to display initiative as well as their robotic compliance to senseless orders. General is not intellectually vibrant enough to decipher the mix-up in spite of available records. The location of the quarry Major brings him agrees with the address contained in the marching orders, the only difference being that a wrongly accented Yoruba word has turned a quarry (where rocks are split) into a Butcher's hamlet. Thinking that Major has brought him to a wrong location, he issues an immediate evacuation and a shoot at sight order. Major's own hollowness is betrayed at two fronts: he complies to evacuate the correct location for a wrong one, and accedes the orders to cause mayhem to human lives and properties without any attempt at proffering a rather civil approach.

Ironies

Okafor Stella Ogonna confirms irony as one of the ingredients of satire. She identifies three types of ironies, which include verbal, situational and dramatic ironies in Godson Echebina's *Ugomma* (7). In this text, Soyinka employs both verbal and dramatic ironies for the purpose of artistic empowerment in order to expose the folly of corrupt political leaders, and consequently reduce them to mockery. Irony is used when one's intention is couched in the opposite of an action. The playwright deploys irony effectively in the text with the purpose of heightening his satirical intent.

The whole play is no doubt one long irony of a butcher who is modest enough to realise when to retire, and resolute enough to remain so in the same society where political leaders with sit-tight syndrome seem to want to perpetuate their stay in office. A specific example of verbal irony in the play is seen in teacher's slip of tongue when he commends Alaba's resoluteness. Teacher's slip when he says "we're speaking of your first thirty days in office" (34) when he actually meant to say "first thirty days out of office" validates the underlying satirical intents of the playwright. Teacher says thus: "Excuse me, only a way of speaking. Of course I meant out of office – one tries to keep up with political jargon. First seven days in office, first ten days in office, first thirty days in office, then a hundred days..." (34–35). Teacher's statement above summarises the modus operandi of many Nigerian political leaders, who seem oblivious of the burden of leadership that is thrust on their shoulders. Bankrupt of innovative ideas, the only political vision and mission available before them is to celebrate days in office, which becomes a good avenue to loot public funds.

There is also irony in teacher's speech of commendation to Alaba for the resoluteness to stay retired from butchering. In other words, embedded in Teacher's commendation lies an ironic contrast, a subtle lampoon of the Nigerian political leaders, whose resolve is to stay inactive in office despite the volume of human and material resources available before them. What we find in the text is that Soyinka engages in a sarcastic tour, unearthing instances of leadership irresponsibility, and ridiculing them by means of irony. A good example is when Soyinka, through the lips of Teacher, extends his lash at the defunct Ajaokuta Steel Mill. The Steel Mill which is located on a 59,00- acre site, the largest steel mill in the country, failed due to corruption and lack of vision of the nation's political class. Teacher continues in his exhortation thus:

TEACHER: Excellent. (Sternly-Teacher to Pupil) Alaba, I don't need to remind you – even when I'm not here, you must carry out these daily exercises. They turn the fiber of the spirit steel, as tensile and resilient as – if I may borrow a vibrant example – the rolling steel mill of Ajaokuta which, like the proverbial rolling stone...

ALABA: Gathers no moss.

TEACHER: After forty years of existence producing the sum total of ...

ALABA: Zero. (40 – 41)

The above dialogue reveals that Nigeria is a nation of manifold tragedies! Soyinka presents this fact, ironically hiding behind his seeming commendation of Alaba to expose the irresponsibility of the political class. When Teacher commends Alaba's resoluteness to remain inactive on the Rock, he ironically lambasts the political leaders for their commitment to indolence and leadership sterility.

There is an instance of dramatic irony when General orders Major to "strike camp and get us out of here..." (97). He thinks that Major had brought him to the wrong location. Although there are no rare mineral deposits in the quarry, the audience is aware that Major has brought him to the

right spot. Soyinka deploys this device to satirise the robotic compliance and the lack of critical judgment which Fela's "Zombie" lyrics suggest of military men from the start.

Humour and Wit

Soyinka employs humour and wit to ridicule the hollowness and aridity of political leaders. Humour has to do with actions which provoke laughter or sympathetic laughter as it is sometimes referred to. Robert Harris contends that satire is a blend of "critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved" (Adenigbo and Alugbin 323-24). The foregoing authenticates the place of humour and wit in satire. The focus of wit is to create comic surprise or shock. The point must be made also that although the text reeks of this dramatic device, not all humorous scenes in it are witty. For example, it is humorous the way Teacher sarcastically contrasts Alaba's resolve to stay retired from his butchering occupation with that of the Nigeria's political leaders' seeming pledge to stay inactive in office:

TEACHER: Transparency is the key, I told you. That is what prevents temptation and backsliding. When you sit up there where everybody can see you cannot perform, knowing that everybody's eyes are on you, you have no choice. We can all bear daily witness to you working assiduously, industriously, methodically and conscientiously at doing...? (Raises his hand. What follows is like practiced routine, with him conducting).

ALABA: Nothing

TEACHER: Thinking...

ALABA: Nothing.

TEACHER: Producing...

ALABA: Nothing... (38)

Apart from the fact that Teacher's sarcasm above is heavily laced with humour, it is even more humorous the way he raises his hand methodically like a conductor directing a choir performance. While it will no doubt provoke hearty laughter in any audience, it is not necessarily witty.

A good instance of humour and wit is seen when Daanielebo makes a comic fool of himself at the sudden appearance of Boy, Alaba's son, with painted face, holding a broom with which he was sweeping. Daanielebo and his men (Figure in Red and Policeman) scamper for their dear lives, assuming that the boy with painted face is Alaba's deity, the demon of the rock, who has appeared to the defense of its adherent:

DAANIELEBO: (Straddling the rock, begins to tremble head to foot) You think I haven't taken your measure? Butcher you say you are, you're no match for the Hyena of the wastes. I shall waste you. A bone is not for the buffalo to swallow, you miserable vegetarian masquerading as a butcher... it is what we tell the garden egg that eggs it into the soup-pot, it is what fire says to the hearth to which the hearth hearkens, the fire consumes the liar, water must drown the plotter, let the power Alapata has buried in this rock reveal itself, let it flow into this body and spirit of the true master...

Enter son, sweeping out unto the house frontage, unconscious of goings-on, wedges of paint on his face. The figure in Red stares, stops in mid-gesture, mid-pause.

- FIGURE IN RED: (frantic whisper) Excellency! Excellency!
DAANIELEBO: Even as the rock opened up and water gushed out in fountain at the command of Moses, even as the Red sea parted and the children of Israel...
- FIGURE IN RED: Oga o. Oga!
FIGURE RED: Oga! I say make you turn and look...!
(Pointing with shaky hands) Owo! Broom! Broom!
- DAANIELEBO: (Looking down on the body whose back is turned to him. Stops.) That one is just a child. He's nothing.
- FIGURE IN RED: Is no ordinary child. It's not even a child, it's his anjonnu with a broom. Anjonu olowo! This is beyond my powers o. emi ko! (turns to flee)
Flees. Stumbles into policeman. They both crash to the ground. Figure in Red picks himself up and disappears.
- DAANIELEBO: Security, protect your governor!
POLICEMAN: (Picking himself up) Yessir. I'll radio for reinforcements. (takes off at full speed)
- DAANIELEBO: (Boy turns. Daani sees his face for the first time) Anjonu Olowo, the demon of the Rock! Yeeparipal (Dives heading over the rear of the rock) (143-45)

It is humorous that Daanielebo who comes confronting Alaba with all manner of charms, Christian relics, and a security operative should scamper for safety at the instance of a small, harmless boy, whom they perceived is a demon that has come to combat them for Alaba's sake. It is also humorous and witty that Figure in Red, Daanielebo's supposed medicine man, should be the first to flee the perceived danger. There is humour and wit when the police officer whose duty is to protect him takes to his heels in fright with the promise to radio for reinforcement.

Historical allusion

The playwright also employs allusion in satirising corrupt political leaders. According to M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, allusion is simply a "passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage" (12). Implicit in the foregoing conception of allusion is that, it is an indirect reference or statement which could be historical, mythological, literary or religious. Of equal importance is the need to also state here that writers employ allusion in their works on the assumption that there exists a thread of shared knowledge between them and the audience for which they write.

Furthermore, Soyinka's treatment of corruption transcends the delineation of corrupt characters. He deploys historical allusion to ridicule the monumental corruption and ills of Babangida's military regime. For instance, the playwright alludes to Major General Ibrahim Babangida's creation of two political parties in 1993- the National Republic Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) - as well as the monumental corruption which defined his regime, ranging from the annulment of the June 12th elections to the unprecedented looting of the nation's treasury:

- ALABA: ...share the akiset – some to the left, some to the right. Like that Head of State, you remember him? The one who created two political parties out of

his military hat – one was a little to the right, the other a little to the left. That man, he swigiligued everything from elections to government money. He was such a natural born swigiliguer, they called him Maradona. Maybe you were too young to know him. (77)

Of course, Maradona is Ibrahim Babangida's nickname till date. And there is no hiding Soyinka's discontentment with the legitimate face corruption drastically took in his administration and the annulment of the June 12th elections, one which was conceived by local and international observers as the fairest elections ever conducted in Nigerian's political history, and which of course would have made Moshood Abiola the President.

There is also the deployment of historical allusion when Alaba is photographed for the carnival, which Teacher, his friend, thinks will immortalise his achievements in the pursuit of a developed society. Soyinka makes a sweeping criticism of the failed Rebrand Nigeria Project initiated by Dora Akunyili, the Minister of Information and Communication during the Goodluck Ebele Jonathan administration, and the failed Vision 2020 launched during Olusegun Obasanjo's tenure. Teacher tells Alaba thus:

TEACHER: (Squatting to align the shot) It's all for the cause, Butcherus, all for the cause. Operation Re-Brand our village. The vision plenty – plenty – until I think of a better name. The vision that made me leap out of bed and shout – just like Archimedes – Eureka... (89)

Soyinka ridicules Nigeria's political leaders for the failure of will to whole-heartedly engage transformative agenda. The rebrand Nigeria project failed because the nation lacks visionary and exemplary leadership which are the panacea for national rebranding. Ironically, the Goodluck Jonathan's administration sought to rebrand a product which is internally flawed by mere logos and sloganeering rather than engaging in an aggressive, transformative agenda which will insist on correcting from inside-out. The "vision plenty- plenty" which Teacher speaks of is a historical allusion to the 2020 Vision which forecast that Nigeria will be one of the 20 leading economies in the globe. Unfortunately, institutionalised corruption fractured the fruition of that vision before it ever sprouted.

Conclusion

Soyinka's *Alapata Apata* lampoons corruption, leadership irresponsibility, sit-tight syndrome, deceit, and greed which define the Nigerian sociopolitical space so as to initiate a positive change. The play is unique in the way it x-rays the nagging sociopolitical decay of the Nigerian nation. The playwright, through applaudable artistry, presents a nation in a cul-de-sac essentially because its fate is in the hands of intellectually hollow and politically arid leaders, who are oblivious of its needs, and thus not in the position to articulate visions in the form of meaningful policies that will usher it in the direction of fortunes. Through the effective deployment of satire, the playwright raises concern about the crop of political leaders in Nigeria, who in spite of the political power they wield, are presented laughable, as their hollowness and aridity will not cease to amuse the least discerning of audiences. Soyinka therefore deploys the satiric devices of symbolism, ironies, humour and wit, and historical allusion to ridicule them, sensitise the Nigerian populace, and in the process revision the Nigerian society.

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