IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Performing Violence: A Critical Study Of The Dramatic Enactment In Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu*

Dr. Abdul Mubid Islam
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Swahid Peoli Phukan College, Namti

Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to bring out the contesting voices in the play *King Baabu* where all dialogues are interspersed with a tinge of violence—more obviously in the dialogues of the two major characters—Basha Bash and his wife Maariya. Soyinka exceptionally mobilizes satire, parody, and Shakespearean allusion to lampoon authoritarian savagery, while scripting violence that is both impactful and estranging. As the play is in the genre of a burlesque comedy, attempts will be made to delineate the satirical projection of the delicate intermixing of the grand ideas of democracy, monarchy and military dictatorship that Soyinka achieves in chronicling the debauched rule of General Basha Bash. The semiotic rendering of the performance will be slightly touched in order to accentuate the gravity of violence.

Key Words: violence, dictatorship, contesting voices, semiotic rendering

Wole Soyinka's artistic finesse and credibility as a playwright is all the more accentuated in the play *King Baabu*. The play is set roughly in the manner of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1898) which is again a crackpot satire of military dictatorship in Africa. Soyinka's own personal experience of such regime which compelled him into exile in 1994 to escape death penalty issued by General Sani Abacha can be regarded as the driving force behind the composition of the play. In *King Baabu*, Soyinka is successful in launching a diatribe against the plague of dictatorship on the African continent in the form of a slapstick comedy.

The term 'Baabu' of the play's title assumes tremendous significance in the sense that Soyinka uses the word totally in his own African terminology. As such, a reader, say, an Indian, should naturally shed off any kind of makeshift assumptions whatsoever regarding the register of the word 'Baabu'. For instance, "Baabu" in the Indian context refers to the class of the *nouveau riche*—those people who enjoys an air of superiority with their newly acquired wealth and ranks (especially the Bengali *bhadralok* during the British regime). On the contrary, 'Baabu' in the African context assumes a different connotation—an impoverished person drained of any wealth, rank or title—a nothing.

King Baabu stands alone in Soyinka's literary oeuvre as far as the open projection of violence on stage is concerned. It is in this play where one finds violence in all its apparent manifestations—overt violence, covert violence, political violence, ritual violence and even psychological violence. The play is replete with violent voices in the form of the dialogues assigned to both Basha Bash and Maariya. The stage directions account for the battle strategies that will be subsequently employed by Basha. But it is intriguing that ritual violence which has been the forte of Soyinka in venting out his thoughts on violence has been

used here in a nominal way and stress has been given more on political and psychological violence. The play is set to portray obvert violence in the use of pistols, guns, machete and other lethal toys of mass destruction.

Maariya becomes an important example of 'violent voice' because it is she who psychologically manipulates Basha and uses him as a perfect puppet to get rid of General Potipoo. She is a master contriver who can go to any extent to fulfil her volatile will. She is the prime agent of psychological violence with her taunting and naggings. The ousting of General Potipoo is one of the most dramatic scenes as Maariya becomes psychologically lethal in her insinuations. The character of Maariya very much resembles to that of Lady Macbeth—the famous Shakespearean she-devil character who was equally vicious in her attempts to get rid of Duncan, the King of Scotland. Maariya's assertive voice heralds a new dawn of the African woman—she declares herself as the First Lady which is suggestive of her instinctive desire to make her identity and position count. On the contrary, Soyinka's vituperative abuse of dictatorship finds ample demonstration in his portrayal of King Baabu's character who has the tendency to fart and wet his pants even at the slightest of enemy advance. King Baabu is presented as a complete foil to that of Macbeth in terms of courage, valour, skill and determination. Baabu is vain glorious and apprehensive of all his actions. No doubt, Baabu's voice is a violent one but in the least restricted sense of the term when compared to that of Maariya.

Maariya keeps nagging Basha for taking charge of the petty portfolio of the Ministry of Agriculture under General Potipoo. It is imperative to mention in this context that politics no longer remain a mere play tool within the domain of man. Maariya's snide remarks and insults to Basha as the Minister of Goats and Cows are intended to rouse his dormant spirit of ambition from its perpetual slumber.

> *Maariya: (flouncing off) I married a fool. (Screams) Your General Potipoo is taking that Ministry of Petroleum himself, and you are the only one who doesn't know it. He's used you for the dirty job—as usual—and now he's going to pack you off to the Ministry of Goats and Cows. (Soyinka, 2002, 7)*

Such mental titillations sparks off the violent one in Basha and he begins to smart out plans of exterminating his rivals and enemies with ghastly tortures like plucking out their fingernails and sending their fingers and toes to their children as birthday gifts.

Basha's violent ideas of ousting Rajinda's government and making his chopped head his personal target practice would not have been realised if Maariya wasn't there to do all the necessary accusations. Maariya is an active female who goes to the extent of eavesdropping on cabinet meetings. She is also a master in the forgery of signatures which ultimately server purpose in ousting General Potipoo. Her voice never hovered around kitchen corners or dining tables but reverberated on cabinet meetings and political discussions with the likes of a political deity. It is noteworthy that Maariya bribes almost all the Ministers with 'big fat envelopes' to gain their favour and support for Basha. In fact, she even declares herself as the family think-tank which is too great a responsibility in such situation.

In *King Baabu*, Soyinka deliberately tries to showcase the transition from military dictatorship to democracy. However, as the genre of the play is essentially that of a satire or more particularly, a burlesque comedy, Soyinka leaves no stone unturned to project the resulting chaos simultaneously. The chaos strings up from the indeterminacy of the masses to identify Basha's monarchical government from that of democracy. Soyinka, in fact, toys with the notion of democracy by tampering it with '*open-ness'*. To speak in plain terms, it is quite significant of Baabu's use of the royal pronoun *'We'* instead of *'I'* immediately after his coronation. His insistence to lunch in the open where everyone gets a chance to see what Baabu eat is intended to generate and promote participation. It remains an unresolved mystery for Baabu as to the exact definition of democracy for his idea of democracy is that of an open society where everyone can work, eat, sleep and even attend the call of nature in mutual harmony.

> *Baabu: See? Government policy already working. This now democracy, open society. You see my office here, also in the open. When everybody begin to work, eat, sleep and shit and fuck in the open, then we know we already reach the promised land. (Soyinka, 2002, 56)*

This statement reveals a lot about Baabu's scheme of things. The political aspect transcends from the intra-continental to the global as Baabu begins to send delegates to the UN to inform them about his noble mission—to *RE-INVENT* the Continent. This proposal, grand and sublime as it appears superficially, undoubtedly cast Baabu in a positive light. However, Soyinka's dramatic genius comes full circle when he

topples such positivity by portraying Baabu devising plans to capture UN representatives to Africa for a huge ransom.

Prophecies and portents afflict King Baabu much in the manner of Macbeth. Baabu remains an apprehensive man all throughout the play. Ritual violence gains momentum with the entry of the Oriental Mystic who was ushered in to suggest remedy to the foretelling. It is in this play that Indian astrology and mythology are used for the first time by Soyinka and therefore the importance of the Indian reading perspective. The mystic entrusted upon Baabu the urgency of offering sacrifices at the shrine of Kali (the Indian goddess of destruction and recreation) in order to placate her. He also warns Baabu to avoid female contact due to the menstrual cycle of Kalakuta holding sway at that point of time. Baabu must sit on the skin of a freshly sacrificed goat for forty days and forty nights and have to consume raw the testicles of a spotless white he-goat. Technically speaking, this act might be regarded as a foreshadowing employed by Soyinka to indicate the deteriorating condition of Baabu's virility and potency which will be elaborated later in Baabu's secretive intake of rhino horn powder to arouse his manliness. The spotless white he-goat can be interpreted as a metaphor, figuratively speaking, especially of the disgust the Africans have for the White man. It may well be argued, from a long drawn syllogistic argument, that the black body will not step back even if it has to consume the white body. This is violence at its utter nakedness.

The depiction of violence on stage has provoked ongoing debate in dramatic theory. Classical Greek tragedy, especially emphasised by Aristotle's theory of catharsis, often relocated acts of violence offstage but harnessed their effects through narrative and emotional build-up. Contemporary drama, however, frequently invokes explicit violence. Soyinka's King Baabu is part of this modern trajectory—though Soyinka's violence, while at times visible, is also heightened by satirical detachment and farce, distancing the audience through laughter and the grotesque.

The violence ingrained in these ritualistic sacrifices is even more bolstered in the counter remedy of the Marabout who asks Baabu to find forty hunchbacks and forty albinos ('albinos'—again suggestive of *White-ness*) for sacrifice. The burning of the albinos alive with padlocks through their lips gives a horrendous image of mass extermination. It becomes quite obnoxious and extremely disgusting a ritual to even talk or think about when the Marabout suggests Baabu to take a spoonful of the powder of the dried humps of the hunchbacks with his stew on regular basis.

Soyinka's approach is rooted in theatrical exaggeration: Baabu's regime descends into surreal tyranny, where his lust for power engenders a climate of arbitrary violence. The language and tone echo Shakespearean tragedy, specifically *Macbeth*, as Soyinka directly references, "Double double toil and trouble…" (Shakespeare, 33) to foreshadow the tyrant's fate. This intertextuality underscores how Baabu's violence—public executions, threats, and purges—parallels the classic motif of the self-destroying despot: "Soyinka emphasizes that the end of a tyrant who has been ruling his country with an iron grip is miserable and disgusting… The fall of the king and the fall of his royal crown are symbolic as they convey the core of Soyinka's protest against military rule…". The violence in *King Baabu* is not merely physical but psychological, radiating through language, atmosphere, and the slow psychological degradation of both ruler and society.

Soyinka's technique seems to partially align with the "Theatre of Cruelty" theorized by Antonin Artaud, where violence functions not as sadism, but as a form of metaphysical jolt to shatter complacency and evoke "the necessity or implacability of theatre and life" (Artaud, 24). In King Baabu, violence destabilizes reassuring narratives and forces the audience to recognize the dehumanizing effects of unchecked power and militarism.

In one of the stage directions, Baabu has to repeatedly stab the lifeless corpse of the rebel leader. Again, Tikim who is Baabu's legal adviser and brother-in-law enters the stage with a bloodied machete in hand and two severed heads slung across his shoulder. These two instances are the most extreme form of violence pitted against man by man. The stabbing of a dead corpse suggests the intensity of anger and loathing and it is quite reasonable when the agent of action is Baabu himself loathed by Maariya for his impotency. A person of Baabu's demeanour cannot carry out a more violent act than the stabbing of a dead body and this act neatly illustrates his character. But to bring two severed human heads dangling across the shoulders is the most horrific and ghastly act imaginable. Tikim's remark that he might have sprained his own shoulder in the act of separating the two heads from their respective bodies is suggestive of the nefarious consequences of war in which even after death, a person is bound to speculate on his body being left intact. Even the most 'violent voice' of the play, Maariya expresses her desire to rip off Moriya's eyes with her own fingers and to tear out her liver.

Maariya: I want her myself. I want to rip into her eyes with my fingers. I want her blood squirting all over my face when I tear out her liver. Come on. (Rushes out with her entourage.) (Soyinka, 2002, 98)

Such barbarism and savagery on the part of a female is quite understandably due to jealousy and personal vengeance. The term 'female' in Maariya's case will serve purpose as "*fed-up-of-males*" or "*feeding-upon-males*" (89) as she can be compared to the Indian goddess of wrath and vengeance Kali. In short, Maariya is violence personified. No wonder why all the sacrifices at the shrine of Kali when one still has Kali-incarnate in his own abode.

In the penultimate part of the play, Soyinka portrays Baabu in a sado-masochistic light. The people of Batwere are lined up irrespective of gender or age—men, women and children—and Baabu watch the mass amputation. The intimidation of the rebels knew no bounds when Baabu is found ecstatic enough to see into the gravity of the situation. The titillating impulse that governs the sado-masochistic drive in Baabu is also due to the huge amount of sniffing rhino horn powder. He takes pleasure in the groans and screams which is again a typical sadistic impulse—the rhythmic swinging of the machete up and down and the ritualistic filling up of the baskets with amputated arms and legs. This reveals one among many things—the dormant, repressed, barbaric instinct of Baabu.

Impotency and manhood are used by Soyinka as significant metaphors in assigning roles to Baabu and Maariya. The lack of virility is apparent in Baabu's case which accounts for his nervous and apprehensive nature. The voices of these two contrasting characters are significant and rightly so because Baabu addresses Maariya as the "voracious virago" (77) which is indicative of the so-called man-power, the standards of which Baabu as a man, fails to defend. The symbol of male authority, namely, the phallus, referred to as the "royal sceptre" is shown to be devoid of any life. The rhino horn powder which Baabu covetously possesses is a testimony to his failing standards as a man. Maariya's abusive remarks to Baabu for grinding rhino horn powder for cheap erection can be seen in terms of a sacrilege on manliness. However, it is this powder, an overdose of which cost Baabu's life.

The stage directions indicate Baabu's body being naked which, arguably so, is an attempt on the part of Soyinka to show the peeling off of the different layers of pretentions, stripping Baabu off to the name-sake meaning of the title—a 'nothing'. It is here that an existential rendering of the play becomes crucial. Again, to talk in semiotic terms, the "naked body" is seen as a sign—a sign that indicates the overthrow of dictatorship by visualising its 'horrid nakedness'; and also serves a significant pointer towards the plays ending and thus prepares the audience to vacate their seats.

Edward Bond is a central figure in discussions of theatrical violence, asserting that he writes about brutality as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. In Bond's *Lear*, the staging of killings, beatings, and even blinding shocks the audience into confrontation with social and psychological truths. Similarly, Sarah Kane's plays, particularly *Blasted*, offer graphic representations—rape, eye-gouging, suicide—that provoke both outrage and reflection. The explicit nature of such violence often yields strong audience reactions—fainting, outrage, and critical controversy—prompting questions about the necessity and effect of graphic horror as a stimulant for empathy and societal critique.

Thus, *King Baabu* is a play that is resonant with violence. In fact, no other play of Soyinka matches *King Baabu* in terms of the presentation of violence. The play has a unique force—a force of enacting violence and its proper representation in the form of the voices, the dialogues and most importantly, the subject matter. Soyinka exceptionally mobilizes satire, parody, and Shakespearean allusion to lampoon authoritarian savagery, while scripting violence that is both impactful and estranging. Compared with the overt brutality of Bond and Kane or the psychologically charged menace of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1959), Soyinka's violence is layered—serving as tool of protest, comic deflation, and philosophical reflection. On the modern stage, violence—whether explicit, suggested, or absurd—remains a vital resource for dramatists seeking to confront audiences with the realities of power, suffering, and the moral consequences of silence or obvert complicity.

REFERENCES

[1] Bermel, Albert. 2004. Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Methune Drama: New Delhi

[2] Kane, Sarah. 2001. *Complete Plays*. Methune Drama: London, pp. 1-63

[3] Soyinka, Wole. 2002. *King Baabu*. Methune Drama: London, (Print)

[4] Shakespeare, William. 2024. *Macbeth*. R Sons Books: New Delhi, (Print)