The Banality of Postcolonial Power

The first step towards the dethronement of terror is the deflation of its hypocritical self-righteousness.¹

The primary focus of this chapter is Soyinka’s methodical demystification of postcolonial authority conducted through the exposure of its ubiquitous banality. In one of his most illuminating essays, he defines his cultural project as an attempt to find a language which can adequately articulate the discourse and performance of postcolonial power, a critical idiom which, while deflating the nature of such power, settles neither for a wholly pessimistic view of the future of the continent nor for an easy utopianism of the sort proffered by anticolonial nationalism. As far as he is concerned,

The dangers posed to society by those who, on the one hand, paint a bleak, unrelieving picture of an amoral, uncaring society and on the other, the ideologues who batten on the supposed ‘class perspective’ shortcomings of the former but cannot evolve an effective idiom for their own active social alternatives would [...] constitute a relevant comparative study for yet another class of neo-praxists. 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 recognise itself in the projection and, with or without the benefit of ‘scientific’ explanations, be moved to act in its own overall self-interest.²

Soyinka presents his revelatory method as falling in between the economistic traditional Marxism, on the one hand, which insists on the ‘scientific’ explication of oppression, and, on the other, the existentialist pessimism embodied in, for instance, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments* (1974). Soyinka’s strategy of revealing the underbelly of African politics, which relies heavily on the defamiliarisation of everyday experience, is similar to Achilles Mbembe’s insight into the eclectic hybridity of postcolonial power formation. As Mbembe argues,

> The postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration, but it is rather best characterised as a promiscuous relationship: a convivial tension between the *commandment* and its targets.³


It is this promiscuous mélange of identity and power that Soyinka attends to in a number of his works. One catches a glimpse of it in his first novel, *The Interpreters* (1965), where the author satirises the hollow discursive locations in which the young educated elite, the postcolonial interpreters, seek refuge. Most notable is Segoe’s attempt to ground his subjectivity in his homespun philosophy of “Voidancy,” a mishmash of verbiage and all manner of ideas and beliefs as only Lakunle of *The Lion and the Jewel* would be capable of engendering. Similarly, Sekoni’s obsession with the “Dome” of life, which in the end earns him permanent residence in a mental hospital, is regarded as an expression of a deep deficit of interpretative agency among the new elite. It is, however, in the duplicity and corruption of Judge Derinola and Professor Oguazor, especially the latter’s fetishising of appearances symbolised by the plastic flowers and fruit which decorate his house, that Soyinka firmly directs his satirical wit at the men of power, revealing the foundation of national institutions as shallow and rotten.

The theme is pursued further and with greater clarity in *A Play of Giants* (1984), which is an account of a conference of three African dictators who, Soyinka says,⁴ are modelled on Idi Amin Dada, former president of Uganda, Marcus Nguema, President of Gabon, and Mobuto Sese Seko, former president of Zaire. The play locates the postcolonial dictator