CHAPTER V

THE SUCCESSOR
The Successor can be said to be a story reflecting the disturbing aspects of political system in Africa. It deals with political corruption and conspiracy for grabbing political power. The purpose of the play is to show how dangerous and self-stultifying the reign of monarchy is, and to highlight the need to switch over to democracy. Emperor Chonda of Masero has the problem of succession, as he is not blessed with male children. In the existing political scenario, his advisors try to grab power pretending to be interested only in the future of the country.

The scene of action is Masero, a semi modern African empire. The curtain opens with Zira, a young dancer, entering the remains of the Shrine of God of Peace;

A lonely hut with a window and a door, at a clearing in a thick of forest (p.1)

Zira, unmarried but pregnant, begs Dr. See Through, the Diviner, Eye of the Future to forgive her for her sinful act. The Diviner sends her away advising her to get wedded at once. After Zira's exit, Chief Oriomra, Minister and Adviser to the Emperor, who has an eye on the throne, arrives on the scene. He informs the Diviner, known for his powers of prophecy, that the emperor will be visiting him that afternoon to seek interpretation of his strange dream. Using his persuasive powers, he
convinces the Diviner to mention in his interpretation of the dream that the Emperor should name his successor as soon as possible, otherwise the storm is inevitable.

(p.11)

The action in Part One, scene two, takes place on a footpath near the Shrine of the God of Peace. Zira confronts Chief Sasia, the other Minister and also an adviser to the Emperor, exhorting him to marry her. She declares with a heavy heart:

I am heavy with your child and there is no running away from it. (p.14)

But, Sasia, knowing that banishment is the punishment for his crime, says that he will marry Zira after the baby is born.

Like Satan in Milton’s Paradise Lost and Iago in Shakespeare’s Othello, Chief Oriomra cunningly tempts Sasia to try for the seat of emperor.

....you have a chance to become Emperor of Masero ... Sasia, your name is on the people’s lips ! (p.21)
As part of his master plan, he sows the seeds of suspicion in the mind of Sasia about Zira. He concocts a lie that Zira is heavy with Jandi's child. At this point of time, he asks Sasia to persuade Zira to claim that she has been impregnated by Chief Jandi, the most favoured name for the crown. This, according to him, can silence the contender for ever.

The same Shrine continues to be the scene of action in Part One, scene three. Emperor Chonda requests Dr. See Through to resolve the riddle of his strange dream in which his late father's head visits him repeatedly. The Diviner advises the Emperor to name his successor, so that his father's head will go back where it belongs.

(p.38)

In Part Two scene one, there is a trial scene shown as a flashback in which Zira blatantly lies that Jandi has made her pregnant. Emperor Chonda punishes him with banishment for the sin. He orders Jandi,

In the thick of night, you must depart from Masero without ceremony. You are a banished man. I have spoken. (p.45)

After this scene, the conversation between Zira and Sasia reveals that Jandi has committed suicide. Zira realises her mistake and arrives at
the Shrine to confess her crime to the Diviner. But Sasia frantically argues against the confession;

    We cannot afford to ......we are playing with fire that burns. (p.40)

As Zira continues to be unyielding, Sasia stabs her with a knife. Oriomra, who waits in ambush for an opportunity, shoots Sasia and flees, taking both Sasia and Zira for dead.

    In the last scene, the action is shifted to the court room of Emperor Chonda. The emperor is of the view that a decent burial should be given to Jandi. In the meanwhile, Zira, with a bleeding wound on her body, rushes and makes confession:

        Oriomra made me tell the lie that led to Jandi's banishment (p.59)

Jandi’s father, Kaisia, declares that Jandi is not dead. He says:

        We had to make believe till the truth came to surface and we owe everything to Diviner See Through ...My son had to be dead, for only death softens the hearts of evil-doers. (p.61)

    Oriomra, in a bid to complete his evil design, arrives at the palace and informs the emperor that Sasia has stabbed Zira to death and that
he himself has committed suicide. With the entry of Jandi, the clearance of suspense is complete, and this paves the way for the Emperor understanding the meaning of all the past events, and for his announcement of Jandi as his successor. In the mean while, Oriomra, has been arrested by the king. Regarding Oriomra's arrest, Jandi says; Empero of the people of Masero, the punishment of an evil-doer is the people's choice. It cannot be left in the mouth of one man. (p.66)

Thus, the play ends with an unexpected hint for the change of political system from monarchy to democracy. However, the answer for the sudden message can be found in the words of Vladmir Klima, who comments on the East African drama.

*Generally speaking, the play should provide theater-goers with entertainment and its conclusion should offer some instructive advice, as well. Thus, East African drama has acquired a role in the educational process.*

The Successor has two Parts. The theme of political conspiracy begins to develop in the first scene of Part One itself with Chief Oriomra urging the Diviner to advise the Emperor to name his successor as early
as possible. In the next scene, Sasia is seen as power-monger, as he shakes hand with the cunning Chief Oriomra in hatching a plot to discard Chief Jandi. Thus, the action initiated by Oriomra in the first scene, is developed in the second scene. In the third scene, the dream mentioned in the first scene is described and the Diviner suggests that the Emperor should name his successor early. The most important aspect of the scene is the clever warning by the Diviner to the Emperor regarding his conspirators:

    Beware of your advisers ....Beware of darkness in light. (p.39)

As things happen on the lines of these statements in the climax, it has a bearing on the main action of the play.

It is the first scene in Part Two that the rapid movement of action takes place and the evil designs of Chief Oriomra appear to be yielding results in his favour. As part of the conspiracy, he makes Sasia stab Jandi and he himself shoots Sasia. Imbuga, in this scene, introduces an element of suspense. This scene generates emotional tension and excitement and the play acquires the structure of a detective thriller. The last scene is set in the court room at the Emperor's palace. This is the scene in which the action moves more rapidly than the previous one
resulting in the arrest of Chief Oriomra. In this way, each act is interlinked with the other by the theme of political conspiracy.

There are not many characters in the play and none of them is fully developed with the possible exception of Chief Oriomra. The force behind the plot is Dr. See Through. But his role is confined to the first and the second scenes of Part one making it an underdeveloped character. Yet, he is made the brain behind the main events in the play.

Dr. See Through, the Diviner of the Shrine of the God of Peace, is regarded as God, since he has the power of prophecy. As he symbolises peace, people go to him to seek peace. Though his role is limited, he has been elevated to the level of a hero. It is he who is the brain behind the death-scheme of Jandi; it is he who saves Sasia from death without whose activities the play would have been a different one altogether. Hence, he can be called the saviour of the Emperor as well as the whole empire. As his name suggests, he is the most virtuous of all. When Chief Oriomra asks him to lie to the Emperor, he is bold enough to turn it down:

I do not earn my living by telling lies. (p.6)

Here, one is reminded of Shakespeare's soothsayer warning Julius Ceaser, Beware of ides of March², when Dr. See Through warns
Emperor Chonda. *Beware of your advisers ..... Beware of darkness in light (p.39)*

He is the center of action and custodian of peace, justice and truth. All characters in the play meet him treating him as the chief priest of the God of Peace. But as an embodiment of virtue, he makes a clear distinction between good and evil. To emphasize this point, Imbuga makes it evident that the proponents of evil and villainy, whatever the degree of their involvement, meet the Diviner outside his shrine. Jandi, on the other hand, because of his sincerity and vigilant advocacy of peace, justice and truth, is allowed to take refuge inside the protective precincts of the shrine when the forces of villainy seem to be on the rise. The physical action of Dr. See Through is limited and the remaining action is left to one’s imagination.

There is only one prominent woman character, Zira. She represents an ordinary teenager, who is physically exploited by the noble class. She plays a major role equivalent to that of the cunning politician, Oriomra. She is a virtuous victim of the political ploy of Chief Oriomra, and Sasia’s over-ambition for power. She feels ashamed of her immoral activity with Sasia as she considers herself unfit even to see the face of the Diviner.

Eye of the future

I kneel before your presence
And beseech you to permit me
To look you in the face
I am down, Doctor. (p.1)

She is torn between the extremely different turbulent situations. As an unwed pregnant, she insists on immediate marriage with her lover, Sasia. But, he hesitatingly says that his friends and relatives will hate him and may think that something has gone wrong. She speaks very openly as a practical woman.

Well, something has gone wrong, hasn’t it?
Something has gone wrong and I want us to put it right before it goes too big for our hands.
We must contain it to save us future questions.
But when I ask you know what you think we should do, you behave as if my very questions are knives at your throat. (p.15)

When Sasia deceives her for the second time with his evil design of making Jandi responsible for her pregnancy, she meekly responds favourably lest her future be in peril. She accuses Jandi before the Emperor:

When I woke up he was still there sitting beside me, stroking my hair with his fingers.
Gradually, as my head became lighter, I
became aware that I was no longer the girl I
had been. (p.41)

However, she realises her mistake and boldly decides, much
against the wishes of her lover, Sasia, to confess her crime to the
Emperor, defying the threat of death from him:

Confession. It is inevitable.... I will do it at the
palace, where I told the lie. I will go to the
palace and confess to the Emperor himself.
The sooner I am relieved of this burden, the
better. (p.50)

Thus,

\textit{Zira is the agent of evil in that her concocted lie
condemns Jandi to banishment; but she is
also the agent of virtue in that her confession
unravels Oriomra's treacherous villainy}³

She is a sharp contrast to all the remaining characters, especially
Sasia. While she loves and sacrifices everything for him, he recklessly
impregnates and forces her to blame Jandi for her pregnancy, so that, it
will be a cakewalk for him to succeed the Emperor. When Zira decides
to speak out the truth out of fear of banishment, unmindful of her love
for him, Sasia stabs her. He is one character who is put to tremendous
conflict in the third scene. When Zira forces him to marry her, he impatiently shouts:

All I am asking for is a chance to sort this thing out. You are asking too many questions and not even bothering to wait for answers. My head is too crowded already. (p14)

Nevertheless, he cannot forget her love for him and for their unborn child. Yet he wants to play the political game to become the successor. On the other hand, he is unable to bear the suspicion that Zira has illicit contact with Jandi. Caught between fear of punishment and love for Zira, his mind becomes restless and he is forced to stab her. Unable to face the truth, he finally decides to commit suicide, but he is shot at by Oriomra.

The character of the cunning politician, Chief Oriomra is almost a parallel to that of Iago in Shakespeare's Othello. It is the only character which is fully developed. Like Iago, with his honey-soaked words and satanic logic, Oriomra poisons the mind of Sasia. He carries on his evil designs by exploiting Sasia's desire for power. Like Iago, who sows the seeds of suspicion in the mind of Othello about Desdemona, Oriomra pollutes the mind of Sasia regarding his love for Zira. At first, Sasia does not believe, when Oriomra says that Zira has a secret relationship
with Jandi. However, the power-monger in him, aided by the cunning speech of Oriomra, makes him believe the villainous words of Oriomra. It is because of this, the second scene of Part Two can be called the temptation scene.

Oriomra’s persuasive skills can be observed from the following conversation:

Oriomra : I don't doubt you one little bit. I am simply asking you to think. I am asking you to open your eyes and look. What do you see?
Sasia : Don't be foolish
Oriomra : No, I mean it. Can you see the opening?
Sasia : What opening?
Oriomra : Our chance. How would the Emperor receive the news?
Sasia : News of what?
Oriomra : Of the coming child (pause) I am only supposing, mind you. Suppose then, that Jandi was responsible, what would it be according to the tradition which the Emperor so cherishes?
Sasia : Incest! Yes, it would be incest!
Oriomra : Correct. One hundred percent correct. It would be incest. A serious crime for which banishment is the
minimum sentence. It is the chance of a lifetime and a knockout against Jandi. Everyone will want to spit in his face, and not even the Emperor himself will want to set his eyes on him.

**Sasia** : (Impressed) You are a genius Oriomra! A real genius! I am certainly glad to be alive in your lifetime. (pp.27-28)

These words of Oriomra are so impressive and convincing for Sasia that he turns to be his powerful admirer, by the end of the conversation. He showers undeserving compliments on Oriomra:

You are a genius, Oriomra! A real genius! I am certainly glad to be alive in your lifetime. (p.28)

Thus, he is known for his cunning ability to elicit from his victims' subconsciousness their most secretly guarded ambitions and dreams, as in the case of Sasia who is the most gullible. His unscrupulous ability to capitalize on his chosen victim's susceptibility which he engineers for the most part has led Austin Bukenya to group Oriomra with

*the most notorious political villains of the stage,*

*all the way from Shakespeare's Iago... to*  
*Soyinka's Secretary in Kongi's Harvest*  

129
Jandi is the likely successor. One can know the reasons for his selection – selfless service to the empire and saving the Emperor’s only daughter, Rita, from drowning. All these heroic qualities of Jandi are heard from the other characters like the Emperor and his wife, Kaliyesa. She says about Jandi:

*He was a good, straight forward, brilliant young man.... But, I still think you were too hasty in your decision to banish him. Had he lived, he would have made a good leader, even in exile* (p.55).

Emperor Chonda himself agrees with his wife:

*I was even prepared to name him successor to my throne. He was very ahead of all the others... and they knew it.* (p.55)

The readiness and unconditional forgiveness that Jandi extends to Zira and above all, the magnanimity which he demonstrates by allowing the people to pass sentence on the *evil doer*, Oriomra, justify that he is the real successor and custodian of democratic values, on whom Masero has hopes for a stable future. Even the Emperor seeks Jandi’s forgiveness, paying glowing tributes to him at the end of the play:
Chief Jandi, forgive us for our blindness and permit us to rejoice with you in this hour of your second coming. Permit us to rejoice with you in your victory against us the intrigues of the devil. You are welcome once again among us (p.65).

Jandi's *second coming* symbolizes Masero's emergence from contagious intrigues of the devil, Oriomra. It also highlights the idea that there is a need to cleanse the entire society thoroughly.

To substantiate these activities on the stage, Imbuga has not involved the character of Jandi in any notable action. In fact, the prospective emperor makes his brief appearance only twice, that too, in the flash-back episode and at the end of the last scene. He should have been the protagonist with much of the action attached to him, as the title itself refers to him. It is the irony that Imbuga has made the character a mere mouth-piece of the other characters.

Martin Banham makes the following comment on the theatricality of the plays of Imbuga.

*One suspects that as may be true of Ngugi's plays, they (Imbuga's plays) read rather better than they act.*

131
Emperor Chonda is short sighted, has no grip on the happenings and lacks quick decision-making power. He always talks of his blind adherence to the laws of the land and boasts of his greatness.

Why then should I, ruler of Masero, the greatest Empire of our time. (p.53)

In spite of Diviner’s warning to him that he should be aware of darkness in light (p.39), unwittingly the Emperor allows himself to be used by the agents of darkness and to be derailed from moral and spiritual normalcy. He

like the majority of his subjects, has been
enmeshed in the cobwebs of Oriomra’s
knavery and outward illusions of reality to take
heed of the warning. 6

Caught in the conflict whether he has erred in banishing Jandi, he says:

He comes, goes and comes again as before.
Did I err in sending him to his death? Death?
No, not death. I sentenced him to banishment,
but he chose death. (pp. 52-53)

The character, Segasega, reminds one of the wise fools of Shakespeare. Though designated as jester and food-taster of the
Emperor, Segasega's role is very significant in the play. Like Fool in *King Lear*, he plays many roles. He plays the role of a food-taster, ironic commentator on the Emperor's political blindness besides the role of providing professional entertainment. Behind the humorous statements of Segasega, there lies the attack on the abuse of power and hypocrisy. He directly attacks the emperor in a lighter comic tone:

Remember the Emperor is no Emperor without Sega, his old food taster. What if the Diviner comes while I am away and gives a root or some bitter leaf for medicine who will taste it before you? The big man is not big without the small man, you know. (p.31)

Imbuga's use of dream exhibits the double perspective of subconscious mind and conscious mind particularly in the portrayal of a character like Emperor Chonda.

Imbuga says:

*Dreams become very important because they are the manifestations of the iceberg, that is man's subconscious mind. The conscious mind, which is only the tip of the iceberg, is*
seen in the actual actions of the characters, but the causes of these actions are really in the subconscious mind. Most of my drama has these two components.\textsuperscript{7}

Imbuga further clarifies the concept:

\textit{It is the drama where actions of characters are influenced by deeply-rooted experiences of their past, by deeply-rooted fears of − or rewards for − past actions.}\textsuperscript{8}

Thus, in \textbf{The Successor}, Emperor Chonda's advisers, Oriomra and Sasia, pretend to be preoccupied with the future of the country. But their real motives and actions to become successors stem from their personal thirst for power and position.

Francis Imbuga has never wasted a word or introduced a superfluous incident in the play. His language is unambiguous, more refined, simple, lucid and precise. He is simple in that he writes prose which is easy to read and understand except occasional use of native language without giving their English equivalents.

For instance, the female voices singing from the \textit{Shrine of the God of Peace} in the opening scene are of this nature.
This is a typical use of language which infuses a truly African sensibility.

The characters addressing the Emperor as Omwami cannot be understood by the English readers. However, these expressions are rarely employed and are negligible as they do not come in the way of understanding the plot or the events in the drama. Thus, it can be said that the occasional use of native terminology turns out to be a virtue for Imbuga, unlike Wole Soyinka, who introduces strong doses of non-English words making his plays difficult to understand.

The language used by Imbuga is well suited to the characters. For instance, as a diviner, Dr. See Through speaks in a virtuous tone, when he is urged to tell a lie to the Emperor.

No, I will not accept to lie to anyone, let alone
the Emperor and ruler of this land. I do not
earn my living by telling lies. (p.6)
Imbuga's plays are known for irony, humour and symbolism. The treatment of the theme of political conspiracy in The Successor is fraught with irony.

In the play, the characters get the same as they reject. It is true in the case of Chief Oriomra, Sasia, Zira and Jandi. Chief Orimora's aim is to see Zira, Sasia and Jandi dead, so that he will succeed the emperor. But in reality, he himself encounters a death-like situation in the end. His over ambition to become an emperor turns him a prisoner. Sasia and Zira who want to become emperor and empress respectively, have remained as they are. It is ironical that Jandi, who seems never to have the ambition to become an emperor, secures the position at the end. Oriomra, who punishes Zira and Jandi, gets himself punished.

The greatness of the dramatic skill of the playwright lies in making the expectations of readers wrong about the climax of the play. By the events, one can believe that it is Oriomra who will succeed the emperor after the death of Zira, Sasia and Jandi. It is in the climax that all these characters are found escaping death, thereby paving the way for the arrest of Oriomra.

Irony is at its peak when Imbuga harmoniously blends it with humour. The ironical humour is well-presented through the character of Segasega, the old jester and food-taster.
Behind the humour, of course, lies the cunning and satirical attack on corruption, abuse of power, hypocrisy and affectation.

Ironical humour is heightened when Segasega mentions the realities behind the making of the big and the small.

E.Chonda : There are big men and small men, all born as such.

Segasega : You are wrong, my Lord. Two big ones can't call each other big, but a small man will call a big man big. Big because the small man has made the big man big. The big man is made of the small man, but the small man is made of not the big man, but smaller man (p.32)

Thus, through the employment of irony, the playwright makes the theme of political corruption very effective.

The element of humour is yet another strong point in the play. Imbuga can produce humorous dialogue for serious characters too. The humorous dialogue and situations are so powerful that they are bound to provoke laughter. When Sasia says that Jandi has dived into the roaring river and has saved Emperor Chonda's daughter, Rita, from drowning, Oriomra replies.
Then it is a Diver’s Medal, he deserves, not the crown (p.25)

Similar wave of humour can be enjoyed from the following characters.

**Segasega**  
I am employed to taste your food before you eat it, and to please you before and after you get upset. That is how I earn my living.

**E.Chonda**  
If you do not behave yourself, you may soon earn your death instead of a living. I did not employ you to crack unfavourable jokes at me (p.31)

Thus, Imbuga spices with humour even the most serious situations.

Unlike Wole Soyinka, Imbuga has used a minimum number of symbols to suit his characters and situations in the play. Again, unlike Shakespeare, whose dramas usually open with disturbing symbolic images — storms, ship-wreckage, ghosts, ominous appearances — Imbuga begins his *The Successor* with a *Shrine of the God of Peace* symbolising the need for serenity, peace and God’s blessings. *The rising sun into the future* signifies the beginning of the activity. The *Forest* image hints at the imminent disorder and confusion of power politics *Hooting of an owl welcoming Zira*, (p.1) indicates Zira’s immoral
presence and the ominous future. Thus, the beginning of the play itself throws light on the impending problem of successor to Emperor Chonda. *The girls' hands engaged in a kind of battle (p.13)* as part of their dancing and singing in the shrine making arrangements to welcome Emperor Chonda, at the end of the first scene, also picture the future struggle for political power among the Chiefs.

The second scene is lighted with symbolic significance with Sasia killing the pregnant rabbit. The rabbit hunting is an externalisation of political hunting for power and self-interest. Zira, who is recklessly impregnated and abused, counterparts the pregnant rabbit. The confusion over Zira's unborn child and the dead rabbit mirrors the political confusion over the future of the country.

*Contrast* is the other technique through which Imbuga presents his theme of political conspiracy. It can be seen in the two opposite themes of the play. The play begins and runs with the theme of political aspects of monarchy. It contrasts with the thematic dialogue of Jandi and Segasega about democracy in the end. Diviner See Through, the bringer of peace, is a sharp contrast to the remaining characters, who create unrest. Jandi, with no ambition for power, contrasts with Sasia, Zira and Oromra, who have an immense thirst for power. Zira, an ordinary teenage dancer, with an important role is again a sharp
contrast to the other unimportant woman character, Kaliyesa, the wife of Emperor Chonda.

Imbuga is not a revolutionary like Wole Soyinka and Ngugi who are straight forward in condemning the evils of their societies with their cruel characters being subjected to the horrible punishments like death on the stage.

For instance, in The Successor, despite Emperor Chonda’s inefficiency and foolishness, he is allowed to reform society while all evil is attributed to his advisers. Even Chief Oriomra is left to the judgment of the people whereas Sasia and Zira are inflicted with violent punishments. This is apparently against the logic of the political plot which appears to be a discrepancy.

A close study of the play reflects the playwright’s views on the contemporary political system in Africa. He has exposed the inherent weaknesses of one-man rule in the play through the character of Emperor Chonda. He has projected the emperor as superstitious, fickle-minded and inefficient, only to expose the disastrous result of the rule of monarchy and to allow the kingdom to embrace democracy. This message of the playwright is heard as the following characters sum up the play:
Jandi : Emperor of the people of Masero, the punishment of an evil doer is the people's choice. It cannot be left in the mouth of one man.

Segasega : Correct. One hundred percent correct. That, if you ask me, is what I call democracy. (p.66)

Thus, Imbuga not only presents the problems of political corruption and conspiracy powerfully but also offers a solution to these problems faced by the African countries soon after their independence. The same idea figures in his another play, Man of Kafira.
REFERENCES


