CHAPTER VII

AMINATA
The major writers of Africa have powerfully presented in their works the impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism on the downtrodden of their country. As has already been mentioned, all these writers explored the themes like evils of tribalism, the effects of cultural alienation, and the frustrated hopes of independence in their societies. However, Francis Imbuga is perhaps one African dramatist who, preoccupied with injustice done to women and their emancipation from burdensome traditional legacies, has powerfully dealt with the theme of woman's rights to inherit ancestral and parental property in his most powerful drama, Aminata. As a playwright of ideas, he does not hesitate to champion the cause of women in Africa.

The play presents the plight of women, who even in the 20th century are unable to assert themselves in a male-dominant society. Of several problems faced by women today, the writer is greatly concerned in the play about their rights to inherit parental property, which they never enjoyed. Powerfully analyzing this problem in the masculine society, Imbuga discusses several other issues of concern, humorously. The anachronisms that have warped the fast-changing society which the central character, Aminata, passionately resists to assert her human dignity, are of universal nature.

The first scene of Aminata opens at a cemetery where pastor Ngoya's grave has just been cemented against his dying wishes. It is
because of this, Mama Rosina, wife of Jumba, the headman of Membe, is locked in a severe argument that he should have consulted the *church people* before getting the grave cemented.

Jumba, the traditionalist, has accepted Christianity and later turned to be a bitter critic of it because it preaches *equality*. He feels that the new religion is forced on him and on the people of Membe by his late brother pastor Ngoya. The pastor is shown in a flashback preaching the new faith. An embodiment of equality, peace and love, he preaches equality of all.

*Alleluyah! Girl, boy, man, woman, where is the difference? It is all in our minds.* (p.20).

As a symbolic gesture to break away from all the taboos of discrimination, he offers to his own daughter, Aminata, the *Church's chicken soup*, (p.20) hitherto an exclusive honour to the male counterparts.

These lines throw light on Imbuga's positive approach to Christianity. Aminata's late father's will that she should inherit his land comes for discussion. The other characters like Mama Rosina and Nuhu, the village mason, speak of the virtuous qualities and generosity of Aminata. But the male members of her family, Jumba and Ababio,
the staunchest supporters of tradition, show little interest in her abilities. Jumba declares,

What! A daughter of ours, a woman, to come and inherit land here? (p.15)

However, Nuhu suggests that Jumba should invite the land circle of elders to resolve the issue. In a state of great agitation, Jumba calls Aminata, a terrible schemer and decides that he should convince the Elders of the Stool against the will. Jumba strongly resolves:

Ngoya's land is Membe's land and it belongs to his sons by tradition (p.31)

Aminata, the protagonist, is shown for the first time in action in this scene. She narrates to her husband what has happened at Membe when she has gone there to formally receive her gift of soil. Calling her uncle, Jumba, a fox, she tells that he is not agreeable to the written will of her late father. As such, the elders of the land circle were unable to resolve the case. She resolves to fight the case till the end.

In the same scene, the image of late pastor Ngyoya reappears in flashback as Aminata recalls her past. His dying wishes are explained in this scene. He has decided to offer her a small gift — A token three acres of his own piece of land (p.46) It was forced on her as he says:
It is difficult, I know, but we must accept change ... you accept the soil, a gift from your father, in his last days on earth (p.47)

In Part Two, scene one, the action is shifted to a place near Jumba's house. Realising that even some of the elders of the stool of rule are not in his camp, Jumba calls for a meeting of all the elders of the stool to finalise the issue of the will. He comes out openly that by leaving a piece of land for Aminata, Ngoya has defied their laws of ages (p.16). But Aminata enjoys the support of the elders. Thus, a ceremony of handing over the land to Aminata is bound to take place. As per the tradition, the headman has to hand over the symbolic container of soil to Aminata which Jumba doesn't want to take place during his headmanship. So, he cunningly decides to resign as the headman and chooses Mama Rosina, his wife, for the position. Thus, he wants to teach a lesson to the elders by putting Rosina to test whether a woman can conduct the village affairs. He also successfully convinces Mama Rosina to accept the headmanship.

In the second scene of Part Two, it is decided that Mbaluto, the son of Jumba, will pass the symbolic container of soil from the headperson, Mama Rosina, to Aminata as per the tradition.

The third and last scene is a rehearsal of the handing over ceremony. Mama Rosina becomes the new headperson of the village
with the traditional stool of rule (p.76) handed over to her by Jumba. In the capacity of a headperson, she arranges the symbolic handing over of the land through the soil container to Aminata:

In accordance with our ways of ages,

I hand over this soil to you,

Through the hands of Mbaluto,

Your agemate and brother,

A gift from your late father. (p.80)

When Mbaluto is about to hand over the container to Aminata, Agege bursts in and tells,

Ababio is dead. Yes, hanging with rope around neck. Ababio is dead (p.81)

The soil container falls from Mbaluto's hands and breaks scattering the soil all over. Aminata too falls down unable to bear the loss and the play ends with the words of Jumba,

It is not yet too late to learn, yet what have we done? What have we done? (p.81)

Aminata is bound by the theme of the rights of land inheritance for women in a patriarchal society. In Part One scene one, one notices that the late pastor preached gender equality and to put the same into
practice, he left a will according to which his daughter, Aminata, should inherit his land. In scene two, Aminata resolves that she will fight them to the bitter end to inherit the land. In Part Two, scene one, Jumba, in a perturbed state, calls for the meeting of the elders of the stool to discuss the issue of land inheritance by Aminata. Scene two marks the announcement of the handing over ceremony and in the third and last scene arrangements are made for the rehearsal of the cultural ceremony in which Aminata cannot receive the symbolic soil container. In this way, each Part and scene is inter-linked by the theme of inheritance of land by women.

Every character in the play becomes an active participant in the events that are associated with the main theme. While directing every character towards the theme, Imbuga presents vividly the conflict of the new order with the old over tradition and alien faith. While the new order is represented by Aminata, symbolising change, the old is represented by Jumba, a traditionalist, who opposes change.

Aminata, a brilliant, diligent and benevolent young lawyer, who guided by her late father, pastor Ngoya's teachings, is steadfast and committed to bring about equality and social change by inheriting her father's land. When her husband suggests to her that she may drop the idea of inheritance of land, she argues with him,
That doesn't sound like my husband at all. George, that will is only the beginning, the storm is yet to come... I shall fight them to the bitter end (p.42)

She tries to explain the issue to him in clear terms:

...look at us, we have worked hard, bought land and other property. Now why should our daughter be barred from inheriting any part of that property? (p.42)

These words reflect Aminata's strong resolve to fight the tradition. Here, Aminata reminds us of Mariana in Rebecca Njau's The Scar. Like Aminata, Mariana is also committed to the emancipation of the younger generation of women from all the oppressive forms of meaningless Kikuyu traditional practices. Mariana declares:

I want them to free themselves from slavery,
I want them to respect their bodies and minds,
I want them to break away the chains
That have so long bound them.¹

Aminata, a liberally educated young lawyer, terms her opponents' low ideas of a woman as taboos; they are like the dried leaves of a
rootless tree. She questions Jumba whether it is her mis-fortune to be a woman. Thus, Imbuga not only realistically portrays Aminata as a victim of male domination but also as a woman who gains strength from such a suppression. As Sushila Singh, an Indo-Anglian feminist critic puts it:

The woman-centered perspective now locates specific virtues in the female experience. This concept of the polarization of difference isolates and defines those aspects of woman's experience which prove to be the potential source of their strength with a promise of better future for humanity. This is a kind of subaltern consciousness that articulates the hidden and suppressed voice, thereby generating power in the victims out of their own victimization.²

Imbuga continues to expose the gender discrimination realistically in the play. According to the tradition, it is the son who should buy a coffin for his dead father. But in the play, Ababio, a good for nothing drunk, the son of the late pastor, is not in a position to buy it. It is Aminata who has bought it. Even though the duty of the son is performed by the daughter, she is still seen as a weak and helpless woman for all purposes. When Aminata sends a messenger to prevent Jumba from cementing her father's grave, Jumba says:
Aminata may have bought a coffin for her father, but that does not make her a woman of Membe because she is a married woman and as such she has no right to interfere in the affairs of Membe. (p.5)

In an attempt to prevent her from inheritance of the land, he declares:

Ngoya's land is Membe's land and it belongs to his son by tradition. (p.31)

Thus, the domination of men over women in the name of tradition is realistically brought out in the play.

Even Aminata's own brother, Ababio, develops animosity towards her in spite of her generous support to him. Aminata helps his children paying their school fee. When her father was sick, Aminata and her husband took him to every known hospital for treatment. It is Aminata who has brought water to the door-steps of Membe with the help of the city people. Even this kind of voluntary service to the individuals in particular and to the village in general, cannot convince Ababio to see in Aminata a person better than a man. For all the help she has rendered to her brother, she is called a serpent. Thus, despite Aminata's accomplishments, her abilities have not been recognised in the male-dominant society.
In this connection, it is not out of place to mention Sushila Singh's reasons for such hatred and subordination of women.

*Human experience, for centuries, has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one sided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his real life or in his fantasy life.*

Thus, in *Aminata*, Imbuga offers

*us a fascinating account of a professional woman's concerted struggle to assert her right and proclaim her identity in a patriarchal society, only to annul her attempts by a traditional technicality.*

Imbuga also creates characters who are capable of perceiving good in people like Aminata. Agege, the village idiot, rightly understands the services of Aminata to the people of Membe:
I say also that Aminata is first son born of pastor Ngoya. (p.10)

In the words of Nuhu, the village elder:

Aminata is straight, and our people respect and adore her for what she has done for them. (p.16)

On the other hand, Jumba, the headman of the village and representative of the old order, who is uniquely conscious of his responsibility for the integrity of tribal traditions and man's absolute authority, vehemently opposes land inheritance by his niece, Aminata.

There are two reasons for Jumba to be at loggerheads with pastor Ngoya and Aminata. Pastor Ngoya is responsible for bringing Christianity to Membe and preaching the woman folk equality. By administering the symbolic church's chicken soup to Aminata, she has become her father's representative to spread the message of equality. Having accepted the new faith, Jumba feels that because of his utter disregard for his native tradition, he has lost his children, and naturally he develops grudge and hatred for Christianity as well as for the practitioners of Christianity, pastor Ngoya and Aminata. The second reason is that Aminata is persistent with her demand to implement her
father's will. Unable to bear the thunderous response to the pastor's call of equality through Christianity, Jumba finds fault with the pastor:

Ngoya began that equality nonsense among our womenfolk. Now they actually believe we are equal. (p.15)

These lines reflect Jumba's masculine authority and gender discrimination. In his treatment of characters like Jumba, one can notice Imbuga's concern for women for whom he visualises social structure based on justice and equal opportunity.

Imbuga portrays Jumba as a hinderer of progress. Terming Christianity as bringer of misfortune, Jumba lists out the misfortunes:

Yes, it was his invitation of the city people which gave birth to the Aminatas of today. Women who rush into their bridal beds without a single four-legged gift from their husband's people...Now see how they shamelessly trample down the seeds of our ways of ages.

(p. 18)

Christianity perhaps has the most profound influence on Imbuga. Unlike Wole Soyinka and Ngugi, who in their plays present Christianity both in its negative and positive effects:
Imbuga always treats it positively in his plays as a source of inspiration, progress and justice.5

In Aminata the chief exponent of this religion is pastor Ngoya

Aminata's father is the moving spirit of the play. In the play, the role of pastor Ngoya reminds one of the character of Njoroge in Ngugi's novel, Weep Not, Child. Like Njoroge, Pastor Ngoya understands equality, justice and righteousness from the Bible and preaches the same to the women of Membe.

Ngoya, visionary and Membe's glow worm, preaches equality to the members of Membe including women. He rightly says that ignorance, hunger and disease are their enemies. He preaches them:

... I repeat, that this is the ultimate truth. In the eyes of the Lord we are all equal. All children of God created in His own image from the same clay...why is it taboo for you to eat from the same bowels from which you menfolk eat ?

(pp. 19–20)

With his inspiring preaching, the pastor sows the seeds of equality in the minds of the women folk of Membe. His distribution of chicken soup, which is an exclusive right of men, to all women
symbolises equality. By this, he proves that distribution of the church's chicken soup to women, which is termed a curse by Jumba, will bring no harm to the village. He makes his own daughter, Aminata, taste the chicken soup first. In support of his words, the pastor leaves a will according to which Aminata should inherit a token three acres of his own piece of land. A symbol of change, the visionary explains that it is difficult for a woman to inherit land from the parents, but she must accept the change.

Thus, Aminata and pastor Ngoya symbolise 'change'. By drawing these characters from the real life of the lower strata of African society with the purpose of bringing about social change, Imbuga proves himself a committed writer. Like Wole Soyinka and the other committed writers of Africa, he too fervently believes that drama is an instrument, which reflects the way of life and social aspirations of a race. One can understand the appalling gender discrimination and the ill-treatment of women in African society as the pastor narrates:

... our mothers lived like prisoners. There were numerous activities in which they were not permitted to join. Indeed they were even barred from eating certain types of food. (p.45)
While dealing with tribalism and alien faith, Imbuga exposes the contemporary picture of the conflict between the newly-emergent religion and the native Luhya faith - the clash between the tribal faith and the social pressure brought about by Christianity. Here, we are reminded of Chinua Achebe's two famous novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *The Arrow of the God*, which articulate social change brought about through religious and cultural conflict and tensions.

*Aminata* is strong not only in terms of its theme, but it also presents Imbuga's ability to explain certain aspects humorously. Agege, a master of odd jobs, is the main source of humour. He is the messenger of Membe's stool, a woodcutter and an information officer. He is also a *village idiot* who refers to himself as a grave digger. He even wears a special uniform reminding one of an Elizabethan stage fool. When he is shown on the stage for the first time in scene one, his conversation with Jumba, who is very serious, invokes humour.

**Jumba:** Stop that ranting, you idiot,
I was talking to men.

**Agege:** Men? And me? Me you call women?

...Alright show me breast
of a woman on my body now. (p.8)

Agege's particular use of language is fraught with reality and it always invites laughter and amusement, suggesting he is the most
sympathetic character. His use of English language, full of syntactical and grammatical errors, is also a source of humour. When he mentions the name of Aminata in support of her abilities, Jumba calls him a porcupine, Agege replies:

Porcupine? Now that is double twice. Idiot, then woman, then the porcupine also. Call me anything but my mouth is for truth. Aminata is equal than Ababio. Me also Aeeh, too much fire! Every day, every day, Agege light fire, Agege cut grass. Agege dig grave, Agege fetch water. Every morning, Agege feed dog, Agege feed cow, Agege feed hen! Why? I am not machine without bloodless! Even machine drink petrol also. So, from to day now I am for respect me and I respect you back. (p.9)

As Ahmad Harb puts it:

Despite Agege’s characteristic utterances and verbal confusion, he is ironically the clearest and the most direct voice of truth and equality.

Nuhu, the village elder, rightly observes:
His words do not smell of the idiot you people say he is. (p.11)

Ababio is the other character who entertains the audience with his characteristic talk of a drunkard. In addition to humour, one finds the reflection of major aspects of the play in his talk:

A will? What is a will? The wishes of the dead! Since when did the dead start having wishes? ... What do they know about our home? Zero, I tell you, zero! (p.23)

He is a drunkard and is under the influence of wine and still he criticises the drunkards, as if he was not a drunkard at all.

Uncle, what is the matter? Do you think I am drunk? No, you are wrong. I only tasted. First Timothy Chapter five, verse twenty three; Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake. (p.23)

Ababio's words are full of laughter when he teaches Ndururu, a mason, the art of controlling a wife. The conversation between them entertains the audience.
Ndururu : No, give me my money and let me go. You know I am married to the devil herself. She won't believe I have been here all this time.

Ababio : Hen-pecked, that's what I call it. You have spoilt her.

Ndururu : So what do you want me to do? Beat her up every time she opens her mouth?

Ababio : I speak from experience brother, many years' experience. A little slap on the cheek can work miracles. (p.25)

Ironic humour is upper most in the conversation between Dr. Mulemi, Aminata's husband, and his aunty, Kezia. Expressing anger at Dr. Mulemi's experiments for strange methods of family planning system, she quotes a line from the Bible when he is playing the game of darts:

God put Adam and Hawa in the Garden of Eden and said, 'Go ye and multiply.' He did not tell them to go ye and play darts! (p.36)

When Kezia says that her son is blessed with a girl child, Dr. Mulemi asks her:
Is that one not the seventh? (p.38)

She replies triumphantly:

No, no, no, that one is the eighth. The last ones were twins (p.38)

Thus, apart from a powerful theme, the play lives on its humour.

**Aminata** is rich in recurrent images which gather meaning as the action of the play progresses. The grave-cementing scene with which the play begins, indicates the very idea of the antagonist, Jumba, to stop inheritance of land by Aminata. It is the grave of late pastor Ngoya and the cementing of the same is against his death wishes. Ngoya symbolises equality and religious change, and thus cementing of his grave also suggests the nature of impending action against Aminata. Jumba’s denunciation of Aminata is couched in beast imagery. Thus, Aminata is called a tigress', **hot-blooded witch**, **Membe black sheep** and an **egret**. The use of these terms signify Jumba’s animosity for Aminata. Tigress stands for Aminata’s swiftness and ferocious nature to achieve her land rights while a witch stands for her miraculous escape from his curse. Jumba calls Ababio a porcupine for his ugliness. Aminata calls Jumba, a fox and Rosina too suggests the same title to him saying *married a fox*, indicating his cunning nature. **Second knife** connotes vasectomy. The animals like rats, monkeys and rabbits which Dr. Mulemi keeps for research on family planning methods, are
suggestive of mindless production of children without control by the people of Membe. Thus, the verbal imagery which consists principally of brute images aptly suits the conventional conversation of Jumba and others.

Proverbs and other traditional sayings, scattered throughout the play, are drawn from the life and language of Africa. For instance, Rosina tries to convince Jumba that he should have consulted the church authorities before the grave of Ngoya had been cemented. But Jumba does not pay any attention to it. Mama Rosina teaches him, *A wiseman fills his ears before he empties his mouth* (p.3). *The tortoise may be slow, but it seldom falls.* (p.3) When Ababio fails to pay money to the masons for their work of cementing of his father's grave, Ndururu a mason, quotes a saying: *You can't get blood from a guava* (p.27) Nuhu says: *A lion does not challenge a mouse to a duel* (p.12) Imbuga consciously uses these proverbs keeping the characters' background in view. This way, these traditional sayings are used to enhance the Africanisation of English language.

By using the method of parallels and contrasts, the playwright has reflected the views of characters on life in general and on tradition in particular. Jumba, the traditionalist, who always tries to irrationally exercise masculine authority over women, is a parallel to Ndururu, a mason, who says:
But a woman I don’t trust women in such a position. She will urinate on our heads. (p.14)

But pastor Ngoya and Aminata are a total contrast to these two characters in the play. Jumba, a traditionalist, says:

... tradition protects only the man who defends it. (p.30)

Ngoya declares:

... tradition is only good when it flowers and bears fruit. But it is a barren tradition that imprisons the very souls that gave birth to it.

(p.21)

Mama Rosina stands in direct contrast to her own husband, Jumba. She often questions his so called laws of ages.

Though uneducated, a sensible and wise woman, Rosina, is a parallel to Aminata, who always tries to promote the cause of woman. Kezia, an auntie of Dr.Mulemi, provides a total contrast to Mama Rosina. While Rosina deliberately supports Aminata’s rights of land inheritance, Kezia opposes it :

Her right? Since when has the ownership of land become a woman’s right?. (p.34)
Similarly, Ababio, a worthless drunk, is a contrast to a highly virtuous Aminata. While she is generous to him by buying a coffin to her dead father and paying school fee of his children, Ababio behaves like a cruel lunatic towards her:

Aminata is not my sister. She is a beast, a she elephant that wants to trample everyone underfoot. (p.50)

Through the use of the method of parallels and contrasts, the playwright has exposed various aspects of African life in general and the native tradition and alien faith in particular.

The playwright makes use of irony which intensifies the action in the play. The very treatment of the theme of the play is fraught with irony. One believes that Jumba, the village headman’s, agreement to implement the late pastor’s will turns out to be a peaceful and a sure transition. But, at the end, Aminata breaks down without receiving the symbolic soil container, as she hears the death news of her brother, Ababio. Thus, the play ends with irony reaching a high pitch. Jumba, proud of his position as a headman, himself voluntarily loses it to his own wife, whom he has always avoided as unimportant. Aminata, who vows to fight the traditionalists to the bitter end to inherit her father’s
land, does not gain the fruits of her fight, as she fails to receive the symbolic soil container. As Ahmad Harb says,

\[ \text{Jumba's lofty notion of masculine authority is} \]
\[ \text{ironically undercut by his vasectomy.} \]

This play may certainly be judged by international standards since it has great social relevance not only for African society but for the whole humanity. However, thematically, it suffers from some shortcomings. No doubt, Imbuga is concerned with the emancipation and uplift of women. But this feeling of the reader is tainted with its sensational ending. The ending of the play offers an impression that the aim with which it is written, is not fully realised at the end, as Aminata is denied the opportunity to inherit the land. In fact, the play ends even while the handing over ceremony is at the rehearsal stage itself. The abrupt ending of the play sounds like a personal victory for the traditionalists like Jumba. Nevertheless, Imbuga has a message to his audience by doing so. The last words in the play spoken by Jumba indicate how deep the roots of tradition are. Jumba warns the people against violation of tradition and of its devastating consequences like the death of Ababio. As the stage lights fade slowly, Jumba says:

\[ \text{It is not yet too late to learn, yet what have we done? What have we done? (p.81)} \]
In the words of Ahmad Harb:

Although the play ends with his questioning, the ending does not imply that he has won, but rather it provokes the continuation of the argument among the audience.⁸

It is perhaps, the playwright wants to make his play a thought provoking one. As Girish Karnad, a renowned Indian playwright, puts it:

The drama must move the audience. It is a social activity. It transports the audience to a different world. If it does not provoke the audience, the only inference is that it suffers from some technical imperfection somewhere.⁹

The end of the play also suggests how difficult it is to bring about a change in a traditional society. But it does not mean that Imbuga is not in favour of change. He has provided sufficient evidence in the play to emphasize that change is inevitable for a healthy society. This intention of the author echoes throughout the play.

The play, in fact deals with two major themes; social as well as religious change the former being the foremost.
The first hint of change in the play is provided by Nuhu, a mason. When Jumba recalls the past and criticises Aminata, Nuhu suggests:

the bitterness of past events can blur our vision of today's realities. Forget the past and accept the fact of a little change. (p.11)

Dr. Mulemi, who attacks taboos and superstitions, speaks of change:

Curses we welcome, it will not be the first time. Are we to remain islands of ignorance, in this changing world, for fear of curses? (p.37)

The idea of change is direct when pastor Ngoya prays to God:

God, the time-tasted ways Of our people are best Yet oh, Lord, make us wise That we may accept change. Amen. (p.44)

A careful examination of the words of these characters suggests that the playwright is not blind to the native tradition but is for a harmonious integration of both the cultures – the traditional and the modern. This intention of the playwright is clearly brought out in his next play, The Burning of Rags.
REFERENCES

3. Ibid., p.7/1
6. Ibid., p.581.
7. Ibid., p. 574.
8. Ibid., p.580