CHAPTER – II

PREDISPOSING AND PRECIPITATING INFLUENCES
Francis Imbuga was born in 1947 in Wenyange village to the Maragoli sub-tribe of the Luhya tribe of western Kenya. It was almost two years after the end of the Second World War. It was a time when the Kenyans, who volunteered or who were drafted or enlisted in the King's African Rifles to defend the British Flag, were restlessly searching for jobs in the colony's capital, Nairobi. The white soldiers and the officers along with the beneficiaries of the war and the white-settler farming community were bent upon to expand agricultural activities in Kenya. The whites were feverishly dislocating the natives from their ancestors' lands. The white highlands became larger day-by-day and the seeds of rebellion were planted unwittingly. Soon a state of emergency was declared in 1952. Every one in Kenya was restive and, perhaps, unintentionally Britain fuelled the flames of nationalism by neglecting the interests of the Kenyan subjects who had defended the Imperial flag. The white settlers, oblivious of the winds of change blowing over the Kenyan horizon, were unaware that decolonisation was inevitable. Samuel Govoga, Imbuga's father, who was drafted into the King's African Rifles and promoted from company carrier to foot soldier, was sent back after the war. In spite of this, Samuel Govoga gave the name Davis to his son after the officer he had served. Thus,
Francis Davis Imbuga enters the annals of history against the backdrop of personal and national betrayals, ironic gratitude and restless silence on the part of his father's age-mates.

The period was also engulfed political strife, social unrest and turmoil as Mau Mau's armed struggle for the independence of Kenya was launched.

Mau Mau Revolution was an armed struggle for the independence of Kenya from Britain. In fact, the movement was largely a creation of hostile settler forces. Armed resistance was organised only after the settlers created the myth of an African secret society and the myth was given official support by the British government. The members of Mau Mau never hesitated to bring independence to Kenya. It was a nationalist, anti-colonial, peasant movement motivated by the economic distress, though it lacked a unified political ideology or an intellectual revolutionary cadre. The movement began as an organised drive for land and freedom, as its formal name indicates, advocating the necessity of violence as the only effective means to achieve its goals. By 1952, it became an underground organization and on October 20, 1952, the new colonial governor of Kenya declared a state of emergency allowing detention without trial and thus increasing the number of capital offences.
Thus, Mau Mau struggle markedly influenced the people of Kenya of the times. The colonial soldiers in fact harassed the peasantry of the Maragoli area. The young Imbuga paid a brief visit to Nairobi on his father's arrest and he was mistaken by the colonial soldiers for a Mau Mau collaborator. This aspect of the harassment of the peasantry at the hands of the colonial soldiers as well as the humiliation and helplessness of the villagers who were on the scene at the time, find a place in his works like Betrayal in the City and Game of Silence.

Imbuga's parents influenced him to a certain extent. His father was scarcely at home due to the demands of his job as a security guard in the Nairobi City Council in the 1950's. His mother having passed away when he was young, he was looked after by his grandparents. He used to have quite a few sessions with his mother on the holy Bible. Even his grandparents taught him how to use language idiomatically. His fondness for his grandparents, whose linguistic virtue he could never surpass is immortalized in his play, Burning of Rags. As he was pursuing his studies, his grandparents never informed him about the death of his mother. His sense of despair at his mother's death is grippingly portrayed in Game of Silence. Christianity has left an indelible mark on his mind for he always treats the religion positively, in his plays, as a source of inspiration, progress and justice. He
nostalgically recollects the days when he was reading the Bible stories to his mother:

My mother was a women's leader in our local friends' church, even though she could barely read the Bible. But, we were very close and I taught her how to read the Bible as soon as I was able to read it myself.\textsuperscript{2}

While at primary school, two incidents relating to his personal involvement with Christianity left profound effect on his young mind. The first one was the death of Yohana Amugune, the foremost Maragoli Christian Quaker and the second incident was the death of his mother. He had already lost his father to the economic system that took him to the city to look for work. All these influences have left an unmistakable impression on his dramatic career and much of this has gone into the making of his plays. For instance, Yohana Amugune's services as a pioneer Christian was the inspiration behind the writing of Aminata. The circumstances of his mother's death and the way he received the news are touched upon in the first scene of Game of Silence. The news of his mother's death, like the death news of Raja's daughter in the play, was hidden from Imbuga in order to let him complete his examinations.
Even Imbuga's school period has something to do with the kind of dramatist he became later. He studied at Alliance High School for 6 years. In that school a lot of theatrical activity was going on. His discovery of the dramatic world began with Julius Caesar. In his own words,

\[ I \text{ saw them kill someone and put him in a coffin} \]

\[ \ldots \text{ I was thoroughly upset until the end of the play when I realised the man had not died.} \]

The authentic way in which the performers of the play had convincingly lied to him about the fact of death was the germinal beginning of Imbuga's life in the theatre. During his final year at school, he played the role of Oyoo in Byron Grainger-Jone's Worlds of a Difference. He even directed and played the main role in his play called Omolo. In fact, the play was sponsored for the Kenya National Schools' Drama Festival. But, it did not win any prestigious award for his theme though he won the coveted Best Actor of the Year trophy.

Imbuga's theatrical verve continued as he was encouraged by his peers and teachers. He revised his early script of Omolo and staged it at State House Road Girls School to raise funds for the Kenya Child Welfare Society. The production of the play was so enthusiastically received that John Tabaria, the producer of Voice of Kenya Television,
congratulated young Imbuga on his theatrical talent. He wanted to screen it for a wider audience. However, Imbuga had lost the script and did not have time to rewrite it.

Imbuga's university life too has a bearing on his dramatic career. After schooling at Alliance, he entered the University of Nairobi in 1970 as an honours student in literature. It was during this period, he tried to whet his histrionic talent. He found himself steeped in writing, acting and directing for the Voice of Kenya Television Drama. John Tabaria and Seth Adagala gave him full freedom to develop the drama section of the Voice of Kenya. Imbuga was torn between the rigours of academic work on the one hand and his need for financial help on the other. Mustering up the support of some of his fellow students, he participated in the Television Drama Programme by deploying the art of improvisation to meet their weekly television deadlines. Ironically, Omolo, his first television play, was a tremendous success in Kenya. The playwright throws light on the master servant dichotomy and satirises the inflated egos of the post-independent bureaucrats who always underestimated the intelligence of their servants.

Imbuga did not neglect even the stage drama at the University of Nairobi. He actively aligned himself with the University Drama Society. During his stay at the university, theatre work grew from strength to strength. The biggest success came when the Society produced Wole
Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero* wherein Imbuga played the role of Brother Jero. He also participated in the production of the play entitled *Heat of the Movement* written by Magaga Alot. His acting talent and histrionic skill emerged triumphantly in his playing the character of Owino. Later, theatre personalities like Nigel Slade encouraged the theatrical talent of Imbuga and invited him to produce the play *The Successor*. His credibility as an actor was such that Nigel Slade called the production *towering, Ustinov like*.4

The Department of Literature of the university always attempted to make their courses relevant to the times. It tried to liberate its students from the alienating specter of the colonial education they have imbibed at high school. Ngugi rightly observed

> Such courses supplemented by the study of oral tradition would be important in rehabilitating our minds, but also in helping African writers to innovate and breakaway from the European literary mainstream.5

During the days of his under graduation, Imbuga was forced to write plays for the Voice of Kenya, the Kenya TV. Many budding writers were asked to produce their scripts for the TV production. As they were written hastily, they were not qualitatively good. The hurried creative...
output led to the fall of standards in the plays. According to Gachugu Mahini, Bachelor was written in two weeks, Kisses in two or three days to meet the requirements of a persistent publisher. Due to exigencies of time and lack of effective supervision, he seemed to have produced the plays not quite upto standard.

Imbuga's career as a dramatist flourished markedly during his student days at the University of Nairobi. During this period, he had established interaction with such authors as Ngugi, Leonard Kibera, Okot P' Bitek, Jarred Angira and Taban Lo Liyong, who sharpened his artistic sensibilities. It was during this period he wrote plays for the National Theatre Company that produced his play, Betrayal in the City. In Nigeria, the production of the play drew considerable attention of the audience. Later, the play was selected for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Cultures held in Lagos. Even at the festival, many theatre critics judged Imbuga's Betrayal in the City to be a good play theatrically. According to Mugambi Karanja,

*The play satirized a Pan-African theme with wit, well-calculated sarcasm and on occasions rubbing in of the salt.*

Even Miriam Kahiga, a theatre critic, was thrilled by
Imbuga’s contact with Joe de Graft, a dramatist and senior lecturer at the University of Nairobi, helped him knowing deeply the elements of drama and also theatre. In fact, de Graft encouraged his students to experiment and try to produce innovative plays. In his powerful play, Muntu, he created the character of the Second Son specifically for Imbuga as he found in him a competent actor. In a way de Graft was his mentor. After earning an M.A., degree from the University of Nairobi in 1975, he thought that he must widen his horizons as a playwright.

Imbuga was sent to Cardiff to pursue some advanced techniques in communication and technology there. He had a rare opportunity of working under the guidance of Adrian Mitchell, a playwright-in-residence at the University College, Cardiff. He attended seminars in paly-directing mounted by Geoffrey Axworthy, who had taught in Nigeria in the early sixties and produced Wole Soyinka’s early drama.

During his stay at Cardiff, he had contacts with the educational groups which were attached to professional theatre companies. Moreover, he witnessed some of the productions of Harold Pinter’s Tea
Party and J.B. Priestley's, I Have Been Here Before. During his stay there, he wrote Betrayal in the City for Sherman Theatre, University College, Cardiff. In fact, the play was performed under the title The Shaving Ceremony under the direction of Osman Nuiseri of the Sudan National Theatre. It was during the same period, he finished the first draft of Game of Silence. From Britain, he paid a brief visit to the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. He established useful contacts with a powerful Ghanian writer, Efua Sutherland, who had initiated the Ghana Drama Studio in the late 1950's.

Imbuga attended the First African Polyvalent Theatre Workshop held in Accra, Ghana, in 1978. He had met theatre personalities like Sutherland and learnt something about Ghanian folk-tales. Later, he attended similar workshops held in Kinshasa, Zaire, in 1979, in Paris in 1980 and in Sofia in 1982. He also served as a coordinator of UNESCO children's drama project between December 1979 and April 1980. The project that was conducted in Nairobi gave a very good account of various evolving dramas from Kenyan folk-tales. In fact, eight plays based on folk-tales were produced and they were taken round sixteen primary schools in Nairobi to the delight of the children. Imbuga's stay at the Department of Theatre and Arts, University of Ibadan also promoted his skills as a playwright. There he had his useful contact with the Unibadan Masks, a theatre troupe, which produced plays. He stayed
with Ola Rotimi, a powerful stage director, and briefly accompanied the Unibadan Masks during their theatrical tour in Nigeria.

Imbuga's trips abroad also helped him in establishing his skills as a theatre personality. His visits to Britain, Ghana and Nigeria gave him the requisite critical acumen to evaluate the political moves of his motherland. He was also able to relate the singularly Kenyan problems in a broader African context. He read some works abroad, especially Colin Legum's reports in *Africa Contemporary Record*. He also happened to read about the

*tension and turbulence that followed the brutal murder of the most popular of the young Kikuyu leaders, Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, after he had launched a campaign against corruption and denounced the country's leadership.*

Imbuga witnessed the cancerous growth of corruption at the highest levels in most of the African countries. He also read about National Redemption Council in Ghana and the university students, criticism of and demonstration against *Military-cum-police brutality which led to instant closure of all three universities.* Even in Nigeria, most of the university students of Ibandan were arrested for their
agitation against the government. Some of these events provided him with capital material for his plays.

The political situation in Kenya also shaped his dramatic career. There was a heated debate over the succession of the aging and ailing president Jomo Kenyatta. Some people wanted to capture power by indulging in intrigue and villainy. Charles Njonjo, the Attorney General of Kenya, wanted to capture power by killing most of his opponents. This was not to the tastes of creative writers like Imbuga. Charles Njonjo gave serious warning to the writers who would go against his will. In the words of Njonjo himself:

"It was a criminal offence for any person to compass, imagine, devise or intend the death or the deposition of the President. Further, it is also an offence to express, utter or declare such compassings, imagining, devices or intentions by publishing them in printing or writing."

Certain political events in East and Central Africa influenced the writing of his political plays. The controversy regarding the succession to President Jomo Kenyatta ended with President Daniel Arap Moi taking over charge as president of Kenya. Megalomaniacs such as
Idi Amin of Uganda and Jean Paul Bokassa of the Central African Republic, had been ousted from their presidential palaces and were made roam the world in search of sympathetic hosts. So, writers gained some courage to produce their plays.

William Shakespeare influenced young Imbuga in his play writing. For instance, Oriomra, the Minister to Emperor Chonda, in The Successor, is a parallel to Iago in Shakespeare's Othello. The conspirators, Oriomra and Sasia, hatching a plot to overthrow the emperor in The Successor is reminiscent of Casius and Brutus in Julius Caesar.

The jobs Imbuga held motivated and also shaped him as a dramatist of considerable social message. He worked as senior lecturer in the Department of Literature at Kenyatta University. He continued to devise his plays and send them to TV. He also served as an adjudicator in various drama festivals including the chief adjudicator in both the Kenya National Colleges Drama Festival and the Kenya National Schools Drama Festival. His teaching of English also helped him in offering a critical perspective on any play. He went to the USA for higher studies where he won his Ph.D., from the University of Iowa. During his stay in the USA, he witnessed many literary trends, participated in the prestigious international writing programme at the University of Iowa. He had an exchange of views with the creative
writers from different parts of the world. This, in a way, helped in improving his performance as a playwright.

Imbuga as a playwright is fairly prolific with his publication of nine plays. The Fourth Trial (two plays), which includes Kisses of Fate, appeared in 1972. This play appeared during his undergraduate days when he wrote plays for production in the university.

Imbuga's first play, Kisses of Fate, explores the dangers that the new breed of elders posed to society when they are ensconced into power and wealth. Rocho was disoriented by his brief exposure to monied economy to such an extent that his dismissal of his wife and the repudiation of his own daughter eventually led to the incest between his children. He believes in the narrow and erroneous magical power of money that guides everyone in society. Moreover, he wastes much of his time by discussing at length the valour of his community in the past.

His next play, Betrayal in the City, appeared in 1976. The play is a record of the ill-effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism on the post-independent African countries. It is a protest against the totalitarian tendencies and the political groups, which hold the Africans in a constant state of peril. Boss, the dictator, is overthrown in a coup carried by Jusper, Mosese and Jere, who fight for the real fruits of political freedom.
This play is a symbolic indictment of the regime's politics of double-dealing, deceit, intimidation and neglect. Betrayals upon betrayals are perpetrated in the void of silence.\(^{11}\)

His next play, *Game of Silence*, appeared in 1977. The chief concern of the play is the alienation of rural people. It also evokes man's insensitivity to the sufferings of his fellow men. The protagonist, Raja, is totally indifferent to the miseries and agonies of the dispossessed and the disadvantaged. It is also a challenging play that dwells upon the cannibalistic nature of human beings. John Ruganda rightly observes,

*this has capitalized on the grotesque and the absurd in an attempt to re-orient us back to our essential selves.*\(^{12}\)

Certain political events in East and Central Africa influenced the writing of his political plays. His powerful play, *The Successor*, was published in 1979. It interestingly delianates the story of political corruption and conspiracy for grabbing political power. It is also a play which advocates democracy as an ideal system of government for the
Africans. In the words of Nigel Slade,

*This play could be read in part as a play which highlights lies as a tool for political intrigue.*

*Three men are in line to succeed an Emperor.*

*The second of them, Oriomra, uses lies to establish the need for a successor, and then to eliminate his rivals, Jandi and Sasia.*

**Man of Kafira** is the next play published in 1984. It predicts the return from exile of Bokassa of Central African Republic and the attempted return of Idi Amin from Saudi Arabia to Uganda. The political plot in the play brings to one's mind the similar events in Idi Amin's life in exile. Interestingly, it is to be noted that Abiara where Boss of Kafira is exiled in the play, is an anagram of Arabia, while Kafira is an anagram of Africa. The president of Abiara, Gafi, is an unmistakable reference to Gaddafi who first played host to Amin soon after his overthrow. In this play, the playwright employs *Meta dramatic techniques where the drama interprets itself.*

**Aminata**, Imbuga's next play, was published in 1988. It deals with the inheritance of land property by women in a patriarchal society. While dealing with the most important universal theme, Imbuga presents women as brilliant, diligent and self-assertive in achieving their just rights. Though the play focuses sharply on Aminata's antagonism
towards her uncle over a piece of land left to her by her father in his will, the implications of the play transcend the ruptured ties of kindred blood.

Ndegwa commended Imbuga for having

>> clearly stated the positive role of women in modern Kenya and for having made the women aware that they need not succumb to the traditional view that would diminish their existence or usefulness.\textsuperscript{15} 

Imbuga's \textit{The Burning of Rags} appeared in 1989. This play begins with a conflict between tradition represented by old Agala, and modernity symbolized by his own son, Denis, a university professor. It ends with the suggestion that inter-dependence of the two cultures – the native and the alien – is a prerequisite for a better future.

An attempt has been made in this thesis to study the six plays of Francis Imbuga in relation to the major thematic concerns.
REFERENCES


12. Ibid, p. 163.

