Chapter III

Body/Performance, Body Politics and Postcoloniality: Reading ‘Body Politics’ in Wole Soyinka’s King Baabu and A Play of Giants

Bodies are the tangible material of being. (Tharu, The Sense of Performance, 183, 1984)

If you get an orgasm from bribery

Corruption’s the oil that greases

The national wheels and smoothes the creases

Of the body politic. (Soyinka, OW, II. i. 372-373)

The term ‘body politics’ normally refers to the political connotations of the material bodies, bodies on which major socio-political issues are contested and played out in time and space, and the political body of the nation. Body politics, when looked at from theatrical standpoint connotes a multi-layered perspective as to the politics of the body on stage, the gendered subjectivity, the politics of representation, the body of the Other, the performing body, the actor/audience encounter, the body of the audience, the context-specific historical and cultural production and the politics of meaning, the real/post-real representation and so forth. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to arrive at a negotiation of this multi-layered ideological position as the corporeal participation of the body in the theatre and its very ‘presence’ on stage leaves the spectator to either labour hard in making meaning out of
it as participatory engagement, or to assume that theatre itself in all its variegated manifestations cannot work without the agency of the body. In other words, I want to state that the ‘acting body’ in the theatre not only invests meaning to the performance but also lends and imparts credibility to the entire project of spectatorship.

In so far as the spectatorial engagement or audience participation is concerned, body politics seems to mark its presence in the gaze of the audience\textsuperscript{1} on that something which is on stage—as a symbol of desire and fascination. This symbolic encounter between the body on stage and the audience makes the theatrical engagement more overtly political, yet at the same time, guarantees active participation. This is basically due to the fact that the stage or the performance as such is the most politically nuanced category amongst all other artistic genres, and that any kind of performance is always redundant without an audience.\textsuperscript{2}

Therefore, this chapter plans on using body politics with a two-fold significance—firstly, the context specific ‘body politics’, that is, the postcolonial body working out to form a discourse of itself in terms of signification, and secondly, the ‘body’ on stage which is a much more contestable category in the meaning making process. The study will however focus more on this latter type of body politics which will then be analysed from two different angles—the ‘body’ as a signifier or sign-vehicle on stage, and the performing body or the body of the actor thriving under the perpetual gaze of the audience. The body is a cultural text which can not only be read but also written through action, clothing, dress and this idea brings in the significance of semiotics in the theatre—the validity, viability and importance of signs on the stage during performance.
The following flow chart seeks to illustrate the work plan of the study:

![Flow Chart]

To use this notion of body politics, the study has taken recourse to methodological tools offered by phenomenology, hermeneutics and semiotics. The idea of ‘free play’ or performance of the body brings in phenomenology due to the awareness of both the actor and the audience regarding the ‘presence’ of the body on the stage. One is bound to get baffled at the simultaneous use of these two diametrically opposed ideas of theatrical looking—Semiotics and Phenomenology. It is true that semiotics ‘shows’ by means of
stage signs that which is ‘not present’ while phenomenology conveys the idea of ‘presence’. This obvious rupture between the two disciplines is bridged by means of body politics for which they neatly fit alongside one another. Say for instance, an actor in the midst of performance slaps another actor for a certain reason. Now this act of slapping which in superficial terms is an emotive act is rendered cognizance by the overlapping of the two divergent viewpoints discussed above. Here, the act of slapping the actor and his instant reaction (whatever it might be) is visible to the audience. Therefore, the idea of visibility ordains a phenomenological illustration which in most cases is assured by a striking musical strain (which is an auditory sign). Again, the act of slapping can also be interpreted from the lens of signification as the ‘why’ of slapping may or may not be known to the audience. Now, the body politics dawns upon the audience by way of tickling his/her verstehen (hermeneutical understanding) to assign importance to what simply appears to be an act of violence. The audience takes the act of slapping immediately for granted with the conviction that one of the actors might have infuriated the other actor to a limit beyond endurance, and so deserves it.

The above illustration is an attempt to establish the necessary connection between semiotics and phenomenology as two infallible conditions to assess theatrical spectatorship and to look into the dynamics of such a process. This theoretical underpinning serves to be the base of the study. It is pertinent here to acknowledge theoretical readings on the topic of which mention may be made of Richard Schechner’s path breaking book *Performance Theory* which enhanced an understanding of what performance actually meant in theatre. Kier Elam’s *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* also served purpose in giving the vantage point for interpreting ‘signs’ on stage. Merleau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception*
gave the idea of appropriating phenomenology as a theoretical apparatus in according a place of privilege to the body as a visible site of experience. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* gave the necessary thrust to the analysing of the ‘politics of the body’ in representation from the feminist perspective. Susan Bordo’s essay “Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body” clarified confusions relating to the formulation of the two mutually contesting ideas—*body politic and the politics of the body*³. It would be quite unjust not to credit Colette Conroy whose interesting booklet *Theatre & the Body* provided the much needed insight to reflect on the idea of the ‘body’ as an agency of performance and gave a bird’s eye view to deal first-hand with all the theatrical categories and in making the necessary linkage. Apart from these, Antonin Artaud’s *The Theatre and its Double* and Walter J. Ong’s essay “African Talking Drums and Oral Noetics” are other influential texts.

In the play *King Baabu* (2001), Wole Soyinka parodies the African political system and its Western ideological base through the principal character Basha Bash who ridiculously declares himself as King from the rank of a General. Roughly conceived in the manner of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* (1898), the play is written in the genre of a burlesque comedy in which Soyinka satirically projects the delicate intermixing of the grand ideas of democracy, monarchy and military dictatorship in chronicling the debauched rule of General Basha Bash. Soyinka’s own personal experience of such a regime which compelled him into exile in 1994 to escape a death penalty declared 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, “the sobering currency of the King Baabu archetype” (Soyinka, 2004, 12) in the form of a
slapstick comedy. In his essay, “King Baabu and the Renaissance of Vision”\(^4\) Soyinka vociferously asserts that,

The African renaissance remains a chimera as long as one King Baabu remains among us, his existence rationalised, indeed condoned and consolidated through silence—thus enshrining the cynicism of power either in the management of resources or of political alienation (Soyinka, 2004, 13).

It is no doubt a ‘climate of fear’ (Soyinka, 2005, 12) as Soyinka has reflected in one of his memoirs but it is equally a climate in which political regimes face potential threats in the form of ethnic rebellions and military coup d’états. The play proves to be a quintessential document of African postcolonial representation especially due to the extraordinary dynamics of dramaturgy. It can be argued that the politics of using the ‘body’ on stage is a crucial dramatic device that not only imparts signification but also proves to be the only discourse on postcolonial political violence available for general consumption (here the audience). This chapter also takes into consideration Soyinka’s *A Play of Giants* (1984) in elaborating the idea of ‘body politics’ more effectively. In doing so, the ‘performing body’ serves as the only ‘sign’ on the stage that guarantees both an active participatory engagement of the audience as well as a commentary on the general vogue of postcolonial African political standards.

*King Baabu*\(^5\) 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 play begins with Maariya’s accusing Basha
Bash for being too complacent with the recent success of the military coup d’état that enabled him to overthrow Rajinda’s government. Her reference to Basha’s head as an ‘empty piss-pot’ (KB. I. i, 5) is highly emblematic of the degree of reverence she has for her husband. If the “body is a site of power, and a site where power can be questioned and explored” (Conroy, 5) then Maariya’s reference to Basha Bash as a “goat-fucker from the winds of wilderness” (KB. I. i, 6) is an explicit sexual criticism that goes on to debase the ‘male body’ by likening it to that of the animals. The body politics here appears to be circulating within the domain of gender—the female body castigating the male body. The idea of violence is embedded in such an understatement as going by the stereotypical notions of binary opposition, it is here the male body which faces ‘censor’ regarding manliness and power from the female body.

The ‘body’ becomes the carrier of the conceptual notion of violence in the play. This becomes evident in Basha’s wish to decorate his recently usurped mansion with “spatter of grey matter from his (Rajinda’s) brains” (italics mine) (KB. I. i, 6) and his dream of “flaying Rajinda alive and using his skin for cushion cover” (KB. I. i, 7). This image along with his added desire to convert Rajinda’s chopped head into an object of target practice proves that violence, crystallised from the lens of phenomenological validation, can be visualised only through the agency of the ‘body’.

The study seeks to argue that Soyinka deliberately manipulates the body politics in favour of the female body, re-locating the discursive site of the male body with the hypothetical idea of the ‘transgressive body’ to ‘show’ the impotency and inefficiency of the political body of Africa. However, the female body is taken as a necessary adjunct to voice out the political angst. Soyinka’s gender concern finds a neat exposition in the play A Dance of the
Forests where he presents Rola (nicknamed Madame Tortoise) as a strong, vigorous, arrogant woman who is ever ready to challenge men even at the cost of physical violence. Her obduracy gets illustrated in her self-acknowledgement:

You want me to wallow in self disgust. Well, I won’t.

I wasn’t made the way you think women are (Part I, 23).

Justifying her promiscuous nature, Rola considers her suitors as “Investors” who foolishly ruin themselves in the hope of gaining her confidence.

Rola: Draw your filthy conclusions. I only know I am master of my fate. I have turned my training to good account. I am wealthy, and I know where my wealth came from (Part I, 24).

Soyinka’s favouring the female gender as emblematic of power in his plays like The Trials of Brother Jero, A Dance of the Forests and Death and the King’s Horseman is duly explained by him in his memoir You Must Set Forth At Dawn:

The women were my first mystics of the road, but they were no less palpable, powerful, and political. It was the same women, or their market companions, who formed the vanguard of the assault on the feudal bastion of a repressive monarch, the Alake of Abeokuta. Despite the support of the colonial district officer, they routed him and sent him into a prolonged exile (46, 2006).

One therefore cannot consider Soyinka being engaged in contesting cultural stereotypes; on the contrary, Soyinka toys with cultural stereotypes to bring forth his desired intentions. This is seen in Basha’s outright denunciation of female engagement in matters of politics which he considers to be exclusively male-centric:
Basha: You two army wife can play at rivals all you want; I won’t mix soldier business with women business. You want to fight, go in the kitchen and slung it out with frying pans and soup ladles (KB. I. i, 6).

In the above dialogue, the image of ‘frying pans’ and ‘soup ladles’ semiotically establishes the notion of violence. Apart from considering the fatuity of the hierarchal notions of the binary project (male/female), this dialogue implicitly conjures up the picture of ‘bodies-in-action’ fighting with frying pans and soup ladles. The phenomenological idea of ‘presence’ of the body on stage (which is here absent in the case of Rajinda’s wife Moriya, and also Rajinda himself) is guaranteed only by the medium of language which is again a site of signification. The ever contesting notion of phenomenology tallying with semiotics is dexterously achieved by Soyinka as he tries to negotiate the gap with a fusion of the reference mode via the medium of representation.

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 forging of signatures which ultimately serves purpose in ousting General Potipoo. Her voice never hovers around kitchen corners or dining tables but reverberates 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 an interesting exchange of ideas, Maariya expresses her concern about the falling standards in the government:
Maariya: How many violent depositions and decapitations of heads of government? (*KB. I. i, 8*)

This statement vindicates the inextricable association of violence with politics. Again, it is Maariya who makes a sly dig at Basha’s vainglorious military pride and competence by ridiculing his portfolio of Ministry of Agriculture as Ministry of Goats and Cows. Maariya’s snide remarks and insults to Basha 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 (*KB. I. i, 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 (*KB. I. i, 9*).

The female body in the play can be analysed from two different angles. On the one hand, the larger-than-life figure of Maariya who constantly manipulates Basha through her coaxing and insinuations and on the other hand, the general female body, conceived along the line of stereotypes that serves to be the object of fetish and desire. The politics involved in representing such diametrically opposed bodies simultaneously truncates the grand dimension of mimesis by favouring one over the other. Maariya’s involvement in state politics can be seen to be verging on the extremities of wish fulfilment because it is she who deploys other women to keep General Potipoo satisfied:
Maariya: Don’t worry, I’ve sent some of my girls to keep Potipoo’s mind occupied over lunch. He likes his bit of skirt and fun, you know (KB. I. iii, 27).

The image and expression ‘skirt and fun’ immediately brings in the reference to lust. The condition of ‘lust’ is presented as a fascination for the body of the other—here, the “Other Body” can be seen through the lens of gender differentiation. The female body is always seen as a foreign element by the male body and is ever anxious to ‘know’ it (and thereby to establish a sexual discourse of ‘otherness’) in specific details. This can be argued from the various behavioural symptoms and psychological obsessions of the male body such as voyeurism when it happens to encounter a female/foreign body. This condition is heavily couched in psychoanalysis by various conditional referents such as ‘castration complex’, ‘penis envy’ and it would absorb an entire thesis altogether if we concentrate on it. Having said that, and being aware of the ‘situational hazards’ 7 of gender, we all now know that sex is nature and gender is culture. Therefore, the irresistible urge of the body to ‘know’ can be seen as a cultural conditioning because sexuality is always at stake when the idea of ‘difference’ is taken into consideration. However, in King Baabu, Potipoo’s promiscuity is sparked off by Maariya who is herself a female. At the normative level, this is a clear indication of the female body understanding the need of the male body. The idea of providing ‘girls’ to keep Potipoo in good mood intensifies the body politics as it is a significant political gesture by a female body offering another female body to gratify the desire of the male body. On a broader level of interpretation, the issue of sexuality is realised by “sexual dimorphism”—the “biological separation of the sexes—which renders the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ essential and ‘natural’ (Zimmerman, 5).
Soyinka lavishes Basha’s character with physical abnormalities and anomalies that heightens the idea of body politics in the play. Basha’s sadomasochistic nature is immediately undercut by his failure to maintain composure in crunch situations. The play abounds in instances that proves Basha to be a person prone to panic and nervousness. The following dialogue illustrates this loophole in Basha:

Maariya: He’s blabbering. That special blabbering when he’s scared shitless, don’t I just know it? *(Stops dead).* Oh dear, I bet... *(Sniffs the air).* I knew it.

Turn around!

Basha: *(backs away)* I don’t want to. Lef’ me alone.

Maariya: You’re disgusting. If you think I am going to keep washing your soiled pants for you any time you’re scared...

Basha: I not doing anything.

Maariya: Go and clean up at once. I don’t want any of your subordinates to see you as you really are.

Basha: *(walking out backwards)* Nothing here to clean up, but I wanting to visit toilet anyway. I have the runs. All other beings not like you who get stone for stomach. The rest of us human, have to run sometime or other. Something call obeying call of nature.

Maariya: Are you still here? Next time I’ll really let the news leak out to the soldiers how their general leaks into his pants. You think I’m joking?

Fatasimu *(Basha scuttles off.)* *(KB. I. i, 9)*
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. Soyinka states with conviction after drawing parallels to the real-life actress as “King Baabu, alas, is not the annunciator (sic) of the long awaited African renaissance, and he is further diminished by the conduct of his consort, Lady MacZim, the vanquisher of septuagenarians” (Soyinka, 2004, 7). Maariya 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 character who was equally ambitious 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’ and ‘Queen Consort’ (KB. I. v, 40) which is suggestive of her instinctive desire to make her identity and position count in state politics. It is she who fabricates the romantic notion of a democratic king (mine coinage) in the form of Basha Bash. Soyinka deliberately brings in the Shakespearean association in the play which can be seen in the Tutor’s address to the public on Basha’s infamous coronation;

Tutor: Friends, Guatunans, countrymen, lend me your ears. I come to query
Basha, not to praise him... (KB. I. v, 42).

As such, the audience is compelled to bring down the lens of comparison as a matter of intertextuality.

Quite on the contrary, Soyinka’s vituperative abuse of dictatorship finds ample demonstration in his portrayal of King Baabu who has the tendency to fart and wet his
pants even at the slightest of enemy advance. The hilarity of Basha’s coronation even surpasses that of Mac Flecknoe’s (John Dryden’s poetic persona) when Maariya seizes a conical brass fruit bowl from its tripod and hands it over to the officials to crown him while the ululation reaches its crescendo. One must note that it is the ‘female body’ which transfer/invest the male body with power. Power is to be understood in the performance especially in the act of ‘choosing’ the fruit bowl. The fruit bowl bears the stamp of semiotic reference as it symbolically invests the head/body with power. The politics of representation gets saturated with a dialogic frame of reference because the idea of crowning is again a performance within a performance. The ‘fruit bowl’ phenomenologically renders the possibility of a makeshift crown just due to its replicatory aspect (being round and hollow and made of brass).

Basha’s idea of “Re-inventing the Continent” in the name of democracy in order to realise his dream project of “Operation Fill The Stomach” by a random assigning of administrative portfolios to his minions takes an interesting twist when his brother-in-law Tikim critiques the biased nature of ideological state apparatus:

Tikim: And we begin by re-inventing the government. The whole world is saying—no more military rule. Good. We don’t rule by the Army. But nobody can raise a voice against monarchies because they still have kings and queens even in European countries (KB. I. v, 39).

This overtly political statement clearly highlights the African postcolonial situation. Tikim’s reflection on the Western form of government extenuates the postcolonial African political agenda to be basically copious in nature. His telescopic juxtaposition of Western and African forms of government indicates the vulnerability of the Western political
ideology when it is pitted in the postcolonial context. This is even more bolstered in the gross misunderstanding and misappropriation of ‘democracy’ by King Baabu who has “the tendency to glamorize or mystify the word—democracy” (Soyinka, 2004, 20). 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. Soyinka deliberately tries to showcase the transition from military dictatorship to democracy. However, 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’.

Baabu: We King Baabu the First hereby declare first open court for common people of Guatu. We running open government,...The motto of our government is—Open House—... Seeing the King here, throne and everybody in open air, in manner of traditional rulers of continent, this already account for Openness. No more distance between ruler and people...

(KB. II. I, 50).

One must note that Soynika makes mention of the highly publicised OPERATION FEED THE NATION campaign in his book The Open Sore of a Continent,

The highly publicised OPERATION FEED THE NATION campaigns proved to be nothing other than opportunities to again siphon the country’s resources into private pockets through massive importation of fertilizers and needs or farming culture. They existed only for the jobs that they provided to poster printers, motor dealers (for fleets of vehicles), traveling (sic) and hotel expenses for the bureaucrats. In my hunting excursions, I would come upon a few symbolic bags of fertilizers simply tossed on the pathway and
abandoned, having been “distributed” by party contractors to the satisfaction of pay offices (Soyinka, 1997, 74).

This statement is a clear proof of the contention that Soyinka’s non-dramatic works serves to be a fitting supplement to authenticate the ploys and strategies adopted in his plays. His memoirs therefore cannot be out rightly dismissed as mere theoretical tantrums; infact they lend credibility to Soyinka’s pro-active political stance.

The idea of body politics here makes way for identity politics. It is quite significant how Baabu’s contentiously declares himself as King or Pa Baabu and adopts the royal pronoun ‘We’ instead of ‘I’ immediately after his coronation. This is a verbal ‘sign’ that signifies the elevation of the ‘common body’ to that of the royal body’ for Baabu will continue to refer himself in the royal register. His insistence to lunch in the open where everyone gets a chance to see what Baabu eat is intended to generate and promote participation.

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 (KB. II. li, 56).

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.
The Indian subject position becomes more pronounced in the explicit reference to Kali and Karma. Femi Osofisan, a contemporary of Soyinka also makes use of the Oriental reference in bringing in the practice of Indian Tantras and appropriating it to magic in his play *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*. But his is a very flimsy treatment compared to that of Soyinka. In Soyinka’s *King Baabu*, prophecies and portents afflict the eponymous character 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 chart out the probability of prolonging Basha’s rule. Indian astrology and mythology are used for the first time by Soyinka and hence 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) and to undertake a pilgrimage 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: Kali? Who this kali?

Oriental: One of the few divinities who truly rule sky and earth. *She is all female* (italsics mine). This means that the star of women is ruling the arc of disruption, perched on the apogee of cosmic crepuscule. You must beware women (*KB*. II. ii, 58).

And again,

Oriental: The throne is caught in the disruptive cycle of Kali. The female forces of Kalakuta are permanently in menstrual cycle during the conjunction of sky and earth. Avoid female impurities. Be resolute (*KB*. II. ii, 59).
The Oriental Mystic’s warning intensifies the idea of body politics as it is the male body which is apprehensive of the power/force of the female body. However, the female body in question is configured in terms of divine light (Goddess Kali because “she is all female”). The warning is not just to avoid the so-called ‘impurities’ of the female body but to avoid the eternal wrath of Kali who sets out on a killing spree with a sign of self-inflicted violence—the protruding tongue. It therefore becomes imperative to analyse the ‘Kali’ image as it will throw significant light on the political discourse of gendered subjectivity. Here, the Oriental’s remark that “It takes a woman to know a woman” (KB. II. ii, 59) serves to be the entry point and justification for the following digression.

The anthropomorphic image of the ‘Kali’ is a significant identity marker of the Indian female sexuality. It is the semiotic rendering of the ‘Kali’ image and its symbolic potential that accentuates the idea of body politics. The need for such a rendering and its viability is made plausible by Kier Elam in his book *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* where he states that in theatre “any stage vehicle can stand, in principle, for any other” (Elam, 13) and that there are “no absolutely fixed representational relations” (Elam, 13). As such, any gestural, verbal or acoustical reference to an image are worthy of semiotic interpretation. The Oriental’s warning serves to be a performative act as it warns the male body about the transgressive potential of the female body. According to the Tantra Sastra (in Woodroffe, 2008), the Indian Goddess Kali has multiple incarnation chief among which are—Bhadra Kali, Shyama Kali, Devi Tripura⁸ and Dakshina Kali or Chamunda Kali.⁹ It is the latter Kali incarnate that is normally associated with power, rage, sexuality and sacrifice. Interestingly enough, the phenomenological appropriation of Kali on the stage is downplayed via the mode of reference (embodied in language) as it would demand a whole lot of familiarity of
the performer (taking it for granted that the actor in question is African) with Indian mythology and the sastras. The revelling tension is thus negotiated with the mere abstract application of the ‘Kali’ image and its conceptual appropriation on stage.

The ‘body’ of Chamunda Kali is ‘black’ with a tongue stretching out from the epiglottis. The colour ‘red’ that distinguishes the tongue from other body parts immediately brings in the symbolic association of blood (human sacrifices in particular) which is the only ‘appetizer’ of her rage. Michael Magee’s book *The Magic of Kali: Inner Secrets of a Tantric Goddess* gives a brief idea of the anthropomorphic image of Kali,

> Modern pictures of her *show* her (italics mine) standing on the dead body of her consort Siva, with four arms, a necklace of fifty human skulls, a girdle of human arms, holding an axe, a trident, a severed human head and a bowl of blood....She herself is the colour of a thundercloud. Her protruding tongue drips with the fresh blood of her enemies....She is the goddess in her own form as Daksina Kali (Magee, 1995, 1-2).

There are however differences in opinion regarding the ‘defeated male identity’ at her feet which according to other Trantric scholars is the demon Mahisa for which she got the name Mahishamardani (Magee, 1995, 3). But the reason for stretching out the tongue has a history of how she once accidentally stepped upon the body of her divine spouse Lord Shiva. The moment she realised the gravity of the act, she dropped out her tongue much in the manner of a stimulus-response syndrome. But the historicity of this religiously sanctified discourse seems to have undergone interpolation with some deliberate appropriation of the gendered discourse. This is because one is often at pains to digest the politics of mimesis behind the Kali image as so devout and remorseful even in her bouts of ferocity that she
‘chooses’ to put on that moment of regret for eternity, marked off with the dangling of the tongue. It therefore becomes quite intriguing to read her image in the light of this play as much in the manner of Basha’s desire of chopping heads and Tikim’s virtual carrying of severed human heads as She too eternally possess a garland ornamented with human skulls. From the standpoint of the feminist/gender discourse of sexuality, the Kali image accentuates the body politics in the deliberate dismissal of the ‘male body’ (erstwhile the body of Mahisa or Siva which stands for male quotidian existence) from the hegemonic discourse of power relation—a subversion of the ‘old’ feminist model of body politics which “subsumed all patriarchal institutions and practices under an oppressor/oppressed model which theorised men as ‘possessing’ and wielding power over women, who are viewed correspondingly as being utterly power-less” (Bordo, 252, 1999).

The coronation ceremony also certifies the royal delusion of Basha. As far as the Indian subject position is concerned, the etymological root of the term ‘Baabu’ in the title can be traced back to the colonial period. “Baabu” in the Indian context refers to the class of *nouveau riche*—those people who enjoys an air of superiority with their newly acquired modernity in terms of education, wealth and rank and their immediate proximity with British mannerisms (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. Soyink uses the word totally in his own African terminology.

Tutor: Impoverished. Own nothing. Same thing—baabu!

Basha: Own nothing. Same thing—baabu (*KB*. I. v, 45).
In *King Baabu*, Soyinka also tries to fuse the oriental belief systems with that of the ‘Maagribs’ (here, the term refers to the West not of the Christians but that of the Arabs) in the character of the Marabout who persuades Baabu to sacrifice forty spot-less white “he-goat” and to consume their testicles raw daily. Technically speaking, this obnoxious image of a ritual can be seen as a foreshadowing technique deftly 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 of disgust the Africans have for the White man. It not only illustrates Baabu’s vulnerability in falling prey to such nonsensical ritual prescriptions for a successful career but also elaborates the African belief-system prone to superstition. The Marabout also demands the sacrifice of forty hunchbacks and forty albinos (‘albinos’—again suggestive of *White-ness* due to the lack of skin pigmentation) from Baabu as a counter-remedy to the disposition of his stars. The burning of the albinos alive with padlocks through their lips gives a horrendous image of mass extermination (*KB. II. ii*, 62). The image of the ‘albinos’ throws significant light on the abhorrence of the ‘white body’ by the ‘black body’. It also explicitly denounces the “lactification” theory propounded by Fanon as the black body in its “objectifying confrontation with otherness” (Fanon, 72, 2008) is bent upon ‘exterminating’ the white body for its moral and psychological rejuvenation. It becomes quite unpalatable 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. It may well be affirmed from a long drawn syllogistic argument, that the black body will not step back
even if it has to consume the white body figuratively speaking. This is violence in its utter nakedness.

Marabout: Our book tells us that in every hunchback are hidden the vital resources of life, far more potent than even the testicles...It hides the elixir of power. This is why the hunchbacks must be chained to the walls and left to starve until only their skins and bones are left. Then the hump falls off, naturally...We shall then reduce this core to ashes, and a spoonful of the powder will be stirred in your stew everyday as long as you sit on that throne (KB. II. ii, 63).

Baabu himself acknowledges his bodily infirmity and his deteriorating sexual health when he makes the following remark to Tikim:

Baabu: How come you so ignorant with all book you read. You know when rhinoceros horn is ground to powder it...it...it er...oh, you know, Tikim...I mean, longest time this royal tum allow Majesty to see if natural sceptre still there or not. Not even sure if still kicking, seeing as no encouragement or provocation coming from royal spouse these many years, I’ve lost count. Your sister turn (sic) me into monk, Tikim (KB. II. iv, 76).

This dialogue is replete with semiotic references that enhance the audience’s participation to such an extent that s/he is now in a much better position to see into the very dynamics of body politics. The expression ‘natural sceptre’ as against the political symbol of the royal sceptre demands a hermeneutical awareness on the part of the audience in coordinating meaning to such frame of reference via comparison. The metaphorical idea behind the expression ‘royal sceptre’ owes a great deal of similarity to the ‘natural sceptre’ which is
indicative of the phallus. The comparison is apt in that much in the manner of the authoritative control of the royal sceptre (quite symbolic) in the monarchies, the implicit referent—phallus—too has lost its pristine glory in the gradual deterioration of libidinal energy in the case of Baabu as he is unsure of its working condition. The symbol of male authority, namely, the phallus, referred to as the “natural sceptre” is *suggestively shown* (italics and emphasis mine) to be devoid of any life. The expression ‘not even sure if still kicking’ is an illustration of this physical dilemma and inevitably imputes a critique of the politics of representation. Again, the reference to rhino horn powder and its medicinal value to replenish Baabu’s sexual vigour is in fact a candid admonition of the sterility of the male body. But interestingly enough, Soyinka manages to manipulate the body politics in favour of the female body as the embodiment of sexual energy and health which accounts for the dialectics. This is proved by Baabu’s reference to his wife as a “voracious virago” (*KB*. II. iv, 77) the standards of which Baabu as a man fails to defend. It is intriguing how Soyinka invests female sexuality with both intellectual ingenuity in the form of Maariya’s expertise in handling political affairs (often through bribe and corruption) and the extraordinary libidinal energy about which Baabu himself is highly apprehensive. The play is thus adroitly crafted in the politics of representing the body, investing both the ‘bodies’ (male/female) with potential tools of mutual censor and criticism.

Throughout the play, there are instances of degrading the body by both genders. This is demonstrated in Maariya’s frustration with Baabu’s ‘pant-wetting’ nature as well as Baabu’s recognising Maariya from an immediate recollection of the odour of ‘cat shit’ (*KB*. II. iv, 79). However, it is the male body which is represented in a comic light as we find Baabu boasting to his son Biibabae of his manhood which is characterised by stink:
Baabu: ...Of course I stink. That is noble stench of a warrior, manly and royal. Embrace it, son and heir (*KB. II. iv*, 80).

Baabu further denigrates the female body as ‘dry chest’ while Maariya denigrates the male body in her abusive remarks on Baabu’s stashing the rhino horn powder. The following dialogues illustrate this mutual denigration:

Baabu: (*lascivious*) What this dry chest know about war chest?

(*Loud, but still leering*) War chests in good robust condition, keeping under guard.

Maariya: I’ve checked the strongbox for rhinoceros horns—it’s empty. I’ve told you they are strictly for sale. We need the foreign exchange but you keep grinding them to powder to give you cheap erection (*KB. II. v*, 96).

The expression ‘dry chest’ is an abject mockery of the female body which seems to have lost its shape and texture with time. It is interesting how this referent ‘dry chest’ approximates with the medical discourse of post pregnancy now that Maariya has a child—Biibabae. The term ‘robust’ is here use as the conditional tool of analysing the female body. At the same time, the expression ‘cheap erection’ is an explicit sacrilege on manliness. Maariya becomes aware of Baabu’s tricks when she finds him to be quite ticklish. Now, from the performative angle, the idea of ‘tickle’ assumes the condition of being uncomfortable with the body—a liminal space which is highly performative. Here, the female body is aghast at the discovery of the ticklish nature of the male body. This also indicates the gradual recovery of sexual health by the male body.
Maariya: (Stops dead. Gives him a long, puzzled look. Slowly) You never used to be ticklish. All your tickle parts are of dry elephant hide—that’s how its’ always been since I first met you (KB. II. v, 97).

In the above dialogue, the female body reduces the sexual potential of the male body ‘tickle parts’ with that of ‘dry elephant’s hide’. This phenomenological summation of the male body in its ontological state of appearance accounts for the politics behind the formulation of human anatomy as the female body is now seen as highly suspicious of the libidinous behaviour of the male body.

The idea of reading violence via performance gives a new impetus in the reading of body politics. The body in performance is an interesting site for critical inquiry because the performing body becomes a discursive site—an agency of cultural contestation. However, the body on display or the ‘performativity’ (appropriating the term from Judith Butler) of the body is shaped by the dynamics of its encodings in representation. Baabu, for instance, takes pleasure in witnessing his son Biibabae inflicting torture on the prisoners. He congratulates the Tutor for training his son to such an end:

Baabu: He take to cracking the whip on whimpering peasants?

Tutor: With charming enthusiasm, your Majesty (KB. II. iv, 81).

Maariya too takes scoptophilic pleasure (a sexual pleasure gained in the act of looking) in witnessing her son manhandling the prisoners. It is intriguing how Soyinka turns violence into a ‘game’ in ascribing his characters with sadomasochistic drives.

Maariya: Come on, little genius of my womb. (Advances. Her air of menace appears directed as much at the prisoner as at the prince.) Do it once more
for Mummy! (Obviously intimidated, Biibabae obeys. The prisoner lets out a shriek and the cage quivers violently.) That’s our lad, that’s our royal blood.

Encouraged and entering fully into the sport, Biibabae applies the electric prod again and again, while Baabu hop (highlighting mine) up and down in manic excitement (KB. II. iv, 83).

Notwithstanding the degree of violence, the aforesaid dialogue and the stage direction highlights the idea of performance within a performance. The sportive nature of such a performance speaks volume of Biibabae’s parenting, predicting an equally violent future. The female body again becomes the prime agent of perpetrating violence because it uses the male body (here in the form of Biibabae) as a mere puppet for self-aggrandizement. Baabu’s ‘hopping’ up and down is a significant performative act because unlike the aggressive female body vying for blood and torture10, the male body merely enjoys the performance. One must note the theatrical register of the term ‘hop’ as it semiotically harps upon the possibility of the denigration of the male body by likening it to that of a monkey-turned-puppet frenetically hopping to engage the audience’s attention in a street show. Again, the political credo of Baabu—“Pax Baboonia” –Peace of the baboon (KB. II. iii, 65) as a counterblast to the Western concept of Pax Brittanica also suggests the monumental degradation of the political body. The image of the ‘baboon’ runs in full conformity with the characteristic association of ‘hopping’ as it belongs to the same species of the monkey. This semantic approximation further galvanizes the idea of body politics that is intricately interwoven in the performance. And it is this reductive estimate of the male body transposed through the rubric of gendered subjectivity that accentuates the dialectics of the body politics.
What becomes more intriguing in theatre is that the performing body ‘act’ as a ‘text’, the authorship and authenticity of which is in the process of perpetual flux. In other words, the ‘text’ of the performing body is perpetually challenged by the element of spectatorship—a kind of privilege which the spectator can never enjoy while considering the substantiality of the two types of ‘text’—the written text and the performance text. However, the body conceived in the form of a ‘text’/naturally abstract has the potential to challenge the performance text due to the taken for granted assumption that the actor cannot ‘re-produce’/‘re-enact’ the same performance on consecutive performances. Philip Auslander in *Humanoid Boogie: Reflections on Robotic Performance* (2006) suggests that the pleasures of watching the performance are multiple and complex, moving far beyond the expectations of any mimetic representation.

Mimesis is the process of representing something or someone in an imitative way through action. Although it sounds as if the word refers to the act of copying or ‘mimicking’, in theatre, mimesis is a form of corporeal analysis. It uses the body to represent on stage and in fiction what happens in reality according to a form of analysis and simplification. The performance is then presented on stage as a text—as a body of material that is there to be analysed (Conroy, 36).

If one regards the notion that bodies are cultural texts as true, one then have an opportunity in theatre to re-read/re-interpret these texts according to our own cultural conditioning. In short, the subject position of the reader/interpreter announces an informal cultural embeddedness (italics and phrase mine) which is much needed to sort out congenial ways of perception.
The climactic scene of the play poses the essential question about the performing body on the stage. 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’. An overdose rhino horn powder chokes Baabu and he falls down after revealing himself completely naked.

Maariya: Overdosed? On what?

Tikim: (helping him on to the chair) On what? He...I have no idea. The first thing I knew, he was clutching his throat. (A movement by Baabu lets the robe slip, revealing he is naked).

Maariya: What a disgusting sight—cover it up, Tikim! (Walks away)... (KB. II. v, 104).

The ‘naked body’ assumes tremendous phenomenological dimensions as it is very much ‘present’ on the stage. The performing body lends credibility to its presence as a sign that not only shows Maariya’s disgust in her referring to the male body as ‘it’ but also serves to establish the link between the performer and the audience by communicating the implicit idea behind such act of stripping. It also reinforces Butler’s assertive remark that the “body is known only through its gendered appearance” (Butler, 2007, 406). Maariya’s act of “walking away” can be seen as highly punctured with the ideals of ‘gendered behaviour’ which reveal traces of her injunction in the restrictive system of compulsory heterosexuality. This act eventually brings in a lot of thought about gender subjectivity and hence the need to give some thought to Judith Butler’s conception of the body. Butler states that “We embody and perform cultural ideals such as gender, living as actions a whole history of bodily action, interaction and interpretation” (Conroy, 57). According to Butler,
gender is a “regulatory fiction” which enforces and censors certain behaviour. What makes Butler interesting is basically due to her insistence on the performative nature of gender which itself answers many hypothetical assumptions of body politics. Butler claims that ‘gender is performative’. Maariya’s performative act—walking away—is an instance in point. “A performative utterance is a form of speech that is canonical and that does what it says it does simply by saying it” (Conroy, 60). The idea of ‘Performativity’ is generally couched in the form of language-action. In other words, Butler seems to suggest that bodies are always conceptualised in terms of language-in-action (phrase and emphasis mine). Therefore, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) she asks whether there is ‘really anything’ that we can call the body itself, without ‘recourse to language or discourse’ (Butler, 62, 1993).

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. It can also be argued that such semiotic renderings of the body politics can reach a target audience which might not have been feasible through any other representational mode.

In order to situate Soyinka and his stagecraft within the rubric of African theatre, let us now shift our attention to make a comparative assessment of some select South African plays with that of Soyinka’s in order to uphold the difference in the corresponding treatment of the subject matter and its presentation on the stage. The reason for such a digressive analysis is basically to establish the extent to which Soyinka’s dramaturgy reflects and addresses the seeming contradictions of the African postcolonial condition in order to justify the need of according the privilege of formulating a new critical terminology—
“Theatre of Drums”. The same methodological tool of comparative assessment would be used in the later chapters as it would offer a major intra-continental intertextual narrative grasp befitting a fitting corollary to enhance the normative African condition. Moreover, such forays would inevitably club Soyinka’s plays as powerful statement in voicing forth the unheard and unsung stories of colonial/pre-colonial Africa that eventually ascribe to the essence of the Africans.

South Africa has a bitter history of totalitarianism and enforced racism. It was with the formation of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission that the apartheid nature of the country gradually began to dissolve.

Apartheid was segregation at every level of societal interaction, from toilets to beaches to bank entrances to places of work, living and study, to many jobs being ‘for Whites only’, to the denial of the vote (Peimer, ix, 2009).

It was during this politically charged atmosphere that a new South African genre of protest theatre emerged which not only included Black Consciousness Theatre but also theatre by whites who were in radical opposition to the racial privilege the whites enjoyed thitherto. However, the most striking aspect of this form of protest theatre is not merely the outright exposing of the current socio-political and economic scenario of post-apartheid South Africa but a tacit holding back of what one normally expects as the foregrounding principle of African theatre—the over-emphasis of the “traditional” performative ambience in the form of rituals, initiation rites, myths, story-telling, song and dance and ancestor worship. On the contrary, this brand of theatre focuses more and is rather keen on fabricating the ‘modern’ African life to keep abreast with the global situation. However, it is the qualitative assessment of the etymological appropriation of the term ‘modern’ that infuses
this theatre with maximum use of scabrous dialogues which distances it from the theatrical accomplishments of Wole Soyinka. Therefore, a careful probing into the respective dramaturgical titbits would clarify the degree of difference elaborated so far.

The play *Bush Tale* by the South African playwright Martin Koboekae brilliantly exposes the intense psychological bearings of the era of apartheid in the form of the White lady’s shocking exclamations and dialogues while confronting black identity. The play serves to be a good area of study of the body politic because the white characters try to comprehend the ‘otherness’ and to make meaning of it by explicitly referring to the black body and vice versa. The adoption or (by extension) allocation of numerous sexual imagery along with the black body’s obsession with and pride in the prized possession of the phallus illustrates the idea that the play seeks to discover or understand ‘otherness’ in the form of a gendered discourse of sexuality. The open and candid reference of the black worker in the play to his possessing “the man-thing” as a weapon of challenging the whites in terms of its size and dimension proves once again and beyond doubt the extremities of psychological repression underwent by the black South Africans during the apartheid regime. The reader thereby can easily formulate the overt nature of violence reflected in the draconic outburst of the black worker while justifying the colour of his skin. On the other hand, Soyinka’s plays adopt a somewhat genial and sanguine display of emotive complexes in the manifestation of a resistance strategy. But the finger rises on the nature and intensity of such strategies—is it pro-active like the South African or is it a deliberate dismissal of the post-colonial violence in order to make it more viable before a global audience? Or is Soyinka’s stance basically to assert a universal post-colonial angst irrespective of geographical location? Or is it a strategy as the Bolekaja critics would have claimed to balance the equation of racial
prejudice? Questions loom large on Soyinka’s intentional manipulation of the theatre to his own end and in order to know the ‘end’, it becomes imperative to analyse his plays pitted in the light of the apartheid regime. This is because apart from his negation of the concept of Negritude as an assertion of a pan-African essence, Soyinka himself on numerous accounts seems to tread on the same path.

The play opens with the white lady’s shocking realisation of the ‘presence’ of the black body—Blacks!—followed by the jutting out of her intimidations of being raped in the process which illustrates the degree to which the white body is naturally accustomed to or conceives of the black body.

Woman: Don’t rape me. He will shoot you (Peimer, S.I, 61, 2009).

This dialogue illustrates the nature of the existence of the White settlers living in perpetual fear of the blacks. Soyinka’s plays however do not directly engage in highlighting any such fundamental threat to white existence but merely seems to be preoccupied in exposing the nature of the existence of the Africans in general pitted in a politically violent time of neo-colonisation. This paranoid mentality of the white body in question establishes two significant hypothetical condition of existence—first, that the whites are now gullible to black antipathy in the apartheid era, and second, that they realise with great fear the consequences of their political ideology which is strictly rooted in racial prejudice. It is here that the reader finds the degree of difference in Soyinka’s handling of the generic issues of African existence because nowhere in his plays (with the exception of Death and the King’s Horseman where Olunde challenges the Western ideological project in a pragmatic way) Soyinka seem to directly challenge the ideological basis of the grand
narrative of imperial control or even let out any life threatening comment through the black mouthpieces.

In the course of the play *Bush Tale*, Jan, the black worker, urinates in the presence of the white woman, Marietta who further repudiates the act as an insult and a sign of lack of hygiene. Here, it is the female body which 're-acts' at the disgusting sight of the ‘man-thing’. But then in Scene 2, quite interestingly, the woman is caught is a similar act which made Jan to question her white upbringing. And her ensuing comments on the observation of decorum and moral propriety kicks off the contentious notion of body politics deliberately exposing white hypocrisy.

Marietta (*straightening up shyly*): You were not here. And it is uncivil to comment about matters pertaining to waste discharged from a female body, especially from the lower part of the body (Peimer, S.2, 70, 2009).

Strikingly enough, the words “uncivil”, “female body” and “lower part of the body” do not necessarily fit into the ethical vocabulary or the kind of observation maintained by the white woman on the previous occasion. It is she who censors the man for urinating in the wild with no water to clean up. Whereas in her case, the same call of nature is swooned up in catchy phrases which accentuates the gendered nature of body politics. In one way or the other, the question of ‘hygiene’ and ‘civility’ arise only in the case of the woman as being the representative of the ‘civilised’ kind of life. Again, one must note Jan’s observation that urinating or defecating are both calls of nature is not just a commentary on the tenacious propensity of the woman to observe basic issues of hygiene but is in fact an effort to find loopholes in the living standards of the whites who profess to be the most ‘civilised’ of all races. As an intertextual reference, the reader is immediately reminded of the infamous
declaration made by the French theatre activist and the founder of “Theatre of Cruelty” Antonio Artaud that the Europeans in general smell like pus due to their utter disregard of personal hygiene. Similar instances of black hygiene is reiterated in Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona’s play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* where the black workers feel humiliated on being offered towels after a compulsive bath to ensure cleanliness on the eve of the visit of a group of American capitalists.

When we finished washing they gave us towels... *(laugh)*. Three hundred of us, man! We were so clean we felt shy! (Jeyifo, 95, 2002).

Furthermore, the idea of body politics gains a greater impetus in the irony implicit in the white woman’s understanding of the ‘female body’ by ascribing it as the paragon of ‘beauty’ when Jan made an outright denunciation of her as ‘ugly’.

Woman: We all behold beauty in the same way beauty pageants behold it. Smooth skin, make up, nice figure, and a beautiful costume. Well you won’t know anything about beauty pageants (Peimer, S.2, 72, 2009).

Superficially, although the aforesaid dialogue offers a redundant view of the female body, conceived exclusively in terms of its ‘decorative potential’, it also brings forth the levity with which the white woman comprehends her own body in relation to that of a universalising principle of femininity. Such an essentialist notion of transcribing an identity couched in the form of a discourse of sexuality is quite paradoxical—first, it is a dialogue that appears in a South African play spoken by a white character who holds a biased view of appreciating beauty and second, it is a dialogue which equally sabotages and tarnishes the image of the black body (both male as well as female) as being devoid of any grace or
beauty both in terms of skin colour as well as that of the intellect. The woman’s taken for
granted assumption of Jan’s inability to understand and appreciate feminine ‘beauty’ is an
instance in point.

Marietta’s act of slapping Jan on numerous accounts is a significant theatrical sign
suggesting an authoritative control of the white female body over the black male body and
simultaneously a reminder of the superiority complex of the woman for being a white. The
play also highlights the amount of disgust the whites have had for the blacks:

Marietta: ...It is quite an affront to see a group of white people in their
‘birthday suits’ but quite hellish to see a group of blacks naked (Peimer, S.2,
74, 2009).

Here, the words ‘birthday suits’ and ‘naked’ are politically charged up with the polemics of
sexuality and have strong racist linkage. What Koboekae tries here is to assert the brand of
‘modernity’ which the white settlers are privy to especially in the proliferation of the nudist
camps in the West which can be seen as a significant critique of western modernity. But
like Soyinka’s King Baabu, Koboekae’s play Bush Tale does not merely elaborate the
politics of gender which is seen in Maariya’s disgust at the sight of Baabu’s naked body
towards the end of the play. In a word, Koboekae goes a step beyond as he subterfuges the
racial critiquing of the physiognomy of a race by another with that of the grand narrative of
racial violence in the forging of both individual and collective identities. Here, the body
politics operates with a resounding efficacy as it is a criticism rendered with the minimum
recognition of the black body. In this context, the woman is white unlike Soyinka’s
Maariya who is herself black; again, the idea of ‘nudity’ or ‘nakedness’ is seen as a site of
disgust but in terms of degree because the intensity of disgust seems to diminish in a
comparative empirical estimate of nudity of the white and the black body respectively. The sexual register of the words such as “affront” and “hellish” are instances in point.

Koboekae further elaborates the idea of body politics in such scabrous dialogues and frame of references that the reader is naturally driven out of his wits. The black worker Jan glorifies the black body by boasting about the size of his phallus, further linking and approximating it with the general standard of the black males serving as a sexual counterblast to the Western counterpart. Fanon too states the western paranoia of sexual identity by postulating his theory of “lactification” and “penis envy” (Fanon, BSWM, ix).

In the white world, the man of color [sic] encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of uncertainty (BSWM, 90).

It is indeed an affirmation and acknowledging of the alleged raw power of the black male body which is also reflected in the candid declarations made by most of Soyinka’s male characters regarding the bragging about the size of the phallus which one possesses.

In the play Bush Tale, Jan takes an upper hand in glorifying the black body when he begins to boast about the size and profundity of his phallus. His act of dropping his pants in front of the woman can be seen as a sign of obduracy. This obduracy is thus a significant political gesture of affirming one’s sexual identity. Again, towards the later part of the play, the privacy of the female body is bombarded in considerable proportions when Jan sarcastically harps upon the possibility of the gender of God. The woman feminizes God and bears the brunt of Jan’s sarcasm. The explicit sexual reference to the clitoris as the only
part in the female body capable of providing orgiastic bliss suggests that the female body has now become the object of male scrutiny. Jan’s insistence on his knowledge and complete understanding of the ‘black female body’ can be seen as an attempt to distancing the Other body (the white female body) as something obnoxious and foreign.

Thus the play is replete with sexual overtones bringing forth divergent aspects concerning the lives of two different individuals offering a pen-picture of their respective social, cultural, political and ideological assumptions of claiming identity. It is quite intriguing that in spite of the initial hiccups in privileging the individuality/humanity of one another in matters pertaining to racial profiling, engaging in arguments that have neatly brushed aside all sense of decency and propriety, yet the two characters end up with the discovery of a mutual ‘fondness’—a fondness for being in the company of the Other. It can be argued that Koboekae has tries to assert a holistic picture of an identity that is not constrained by the stultifying dictates of racism or social inequality but aspires to reach the culmination of a deeper realisation of humanity which more or less dwells not in the colour of the skin but in the beauty ingrained in the recognition of humanity.

Likewise, the play *Relativity: Township Stories* by Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom and Presley Chweneyagae shows how the idea of a ―rainbow nation‖ gets shattered when human lives are placed alongside with anti-social activities such as rape, murders and racism. It is a statement on the post-apartheid era in which one does not feel free and secure and in which society itself can act in a transgressive manner.

The opening of the play with a piercing scream from a female sets the tone or foreshadows the play’s subject. The mysterious murders committed by a serial killer who goes about in
his killing spree states the deploring condition of the policing system. The violence that gets staged becomes too extreme as the police officials catches a wayside hooligan, Dario, as suspect and in the midst of interrogation burns out his testicles. This is the height of violence perpetrated on the body of an individual. One must note that violence is here administered by the police and hence the claim of state enforced violence. Such explicit forms of physical violence forms the base of the play’s structure as the killer murders young women by strangulating them with their G-strings. Again, one must note that the mention of the type of underwear is quite deliberate to show the advent of ‘modernity’ and cosmopolitan sophistication in the township areas of South Africa.

The play becomes an interesting read due to the significance it attaches to the female body in terms of sexuality. Dario makes love to his girlfriend Matlakala and leaves her pregnant. Although Matlakala insists on the use of contraceptives, Dario refuses. Later in the play, he boasts of his masculinity among his friends and degrades the female body as something that needs to be ‘filled up’. The play is therefore quite shocking from ethical standpoints as it seems to violate all sense of morality and decorum.

Semiotically, the projection of the body making love on the stage, although in a non-naturalistic way, leaves the audience baffled (theatre being a mode of communal entertainment) as it hits the response system of the audience luring them to believe that they are all experiencing pornography in live action. Strikingly enough, most of the South African plays are candid with such projections. But such obscenities and vulgar representations are controlled and refined in the Nigerian plays where any discourse on sexuality is done and presented with a tinge of humour which to a great extent minimises the intensity of abhorrence. The play *Relativity: Township Stories* gives multiple instances
of violence—shooting on stage and rape—which are significant entry points in assessing the postcolonial ‘body’ performing through the strictures of sexual discourse.

Coming back to Soyinka, the play *The Trials of Brother Jero* can be clubbed in the group of plays through which Soyinka has tried to assert the crystallisation of corruption in the African political system. Soyinka therefore asserts,

> They [the African leaders] could not wait to return home and get a slice of ‘independence cake’, because that was all independence meant to them: set fast into the shoes of the departing whites before other people got there

*(Soyinka, xiii, 1998).*

The play is an obvious satire of the church officials who has resorted to petty ways to gain control over the masses. On a deeper level, the play is an elaboration of the colonial stigma of domination which is shown to be resolved in the play’s sequel *Jero’s Metamorphosis*. Couched in the genre of comic realism, these plays express both the vulnerability as well as the gullibility of the African subject when confronted with the elemental notion of power politics. Given the onus of reflecting such ideological dilemma, these plays become more semiotically feasible due to the overwhelming emphasis on the performative angle that seals off with the idea of representation. Soyinka’s brilliance lies in not just stating the colonial crisis but in exposing the pitfalls of the process. The study attempts to show and interpret how Soyinka manages and uses the duality of the body politics in these two plays—first by exposing the disintegration of the political body of Africa in the postcolonial era with near to impossible chance of any rejuvenation, and second, the resurfacing of the violence experienced in the colonial period that never seem to have lost its
impact, (and therefore the need to assess the body politics) making its presence felt in the assessment of the African condition in terms of dichotomies.

In *The Trials of Brother Jero*, the notion of body politics is a bit complex and gender centric; the reader for the first time is able to link the politics of the corrupt system with that of the more apparent politics of the body in terms of gender. This linkage is guaranteed by the obvious intent to expose the seeming contradiction in terms of Jero’s fetish for the female body despite the rigorous moral demands of his vocation being a prophet in the first place. The idea of priests, bishops and clerics profiting from the business on the sea beach can be seen not just as a religious sacrilege but the corrupt and money-mongering nature of these people for whom material acquisitions should be of least importance. Jero’s acknowledging the cheap trickery of his religious peers in order to gain control of select sections of the beach from female penitents is a significant illustration of the prevailing winds of corruption that has made these religious protectors pervert.

Jero: ...Some Prophets, I could name gained their present beaches by getting women penitents to shake their bosoms in spiritual ecstasy (*TBJ*, S.I, 3).

Again, the corrupt nature of gaining territorial control as ‘grants’ by campaigning with “six dancing girls from the French territory” (*TBJ*, S.I, 4) accentuates the debased mentality and deep rooted corruption.

Jero is undoubtedly anti-Christian, nay, a disgrace to his profession. What Soyinka tries to highlight is the negative side to his character in the self-reflexive admonition of Jero about his “weakness” for women (*TBJ*, S.I, 5) when he is reminded of the curse of his master, the Old prophet, from whom he treacherously usurped the domination of the beach.
Jero: Actually that was a very cheap curse. He knew very well that I had one weakness—women. Not my fault, mind you. You must admit that I am rather good-looking... I am still single and since that day when I came into my own, no scandal has ever touched my name. And it was a sad day indeed when I woke up one morning and the first thing to meet my eyes was a daughter of Eve. You may compare that feeling with waking up and finding a vulture crouched on your bed-post (*TBJ*, S.I, 5).

It therefore becomes quite apparent to what extent Soyinka tries to ridicule Jero and by extension the pseudo-religious practice of fake prophets. Jero alleges his old master and blames him for his predicament. But the most striking use of irony is in Jero’s overemphasis on the female subject as “daughter of Eve” in order to uphold the integrity and live up to the standards that behove his fake professional demeanour, completely obliterating his uncanny fetish for the female body. However, this integrity is further questioned by Jero’s denigrating the female body by comparing it with a vulture.

Two things therefore immediately qualifies such an assessment—the denigration of the female body by likening it to that of a scavenger and second, the celebration of a pseudo-Christian identity by dint of the religious register of the words “daughter of Eve.”

In the second scene of the play *Trials of Brother Jero*, Soyinka invests Chume’s wife, Amope with a voice that can castigate and question the male body and male dominated power politics:

Amope: ...A Chief Messenger in the Local government Office—do you call that a work? Your old school friends are now ministers, riding in long cars...

(*TBJ*, S.II, 8).
And later again, in the manner of a soliloquy, Amope laments,

Amope: ...He’s no worse than other men, but he won’t make the effort to become something in life. A Chief Messenger. Am I to go to my grave as the wife of a Chief Messenger? (TBJ, S.II, 9).

In these two aforesaid dialogues, we find the trace of a resistant voice. Amope’s ridiculing Chume’s professional standards bring into mind Maariya’s ridiculing Baabu’s post of the Minister of Agriculture as Minister of Goats and Cows. Amope’s questioning of Chume is a significant symbolic gesture of the female body taking into task the intellectual capabilities of the male body. The element of censorship lies heavily on the lack of financial stability which is indicated in the procuring of “long cars” by Chume’s school friends who are now all ministers. Amope’s anxiety expressed in her soliloquy to die as the wife of a Chief Messenger implicates the hermeneutical understanding by broadening the semiotic appropriation with the degree and range of the horizon of expectation on the part of the audience—the audience is now in a better position to access the true worth of the male body in question no doubt in a more material way. The plan of using the classical props of asides and soliloquies not only brands the mastery of Soyinka’s dramatic versatility but also bolsters the notion of body politics. This is because asides and soliloquies give the audience the necessary insight in assessing a character’s intent and motives thereby guaranteeing an active participatory engagement in the meaning making process. Put simply, Soyinka deliberately makes the most ingenious use of the classical dramatic devices to invest in Amope’s character a power with which she can analyse and examine the intellectual and financial productivity of the male body, if any, so as to reassess her future prospects with Chume as her husband.
As the play progresses, Amope becomes furious with Jero when he fails to pay her for the red velvet cloak which he had bought from her on a previous occasion. Amope goes and sets her rug mat in front of Jero’s house awaiting his arrival while Jero somehow manages to escape stealthily from the back window. This act of escaping not only ludicrously highlights the pauperised condition of the vain-glorious Jero but also serves to heighten the politics of ‘fear’. In this case, it is the male body which flees in ‘fear’ of the female body. Jero’s inability or for that matter his mean-mindedness to pay Amope her dues and his self-conceited nature verging near obsession in distinguishing himself as a prophet therefore intensify one view of body politics.

Right from the beginning of the play, the reader finds Jero concocting plans and strategies and imposing his authority over Chume under the banner of some lame prophecies. The idea of violence that is often imbued with the notion of body politics becomes clear in Chume’s gullibility who is hitherto prevented by Jero in the name of Christ from beating his wife. Interestingly enough, on recognising Amope as Chume’s wife and to escape from his debt, Jero purposefully changes his religious testimony and allows Chume to fulfil his long cherished dream. But intriguingly, the tables are turned when Chume discovers the truth behind Jero’s spiritual gibberish and vies for his blood instead. Jero somehow manages to put a halt to Chume’s pent up violence by getting him locked up in a lunatic asylum.

The element of ‘fetish’ never seems to subside in the case of Jero as he is always found desperate to get rid of his “weakness” either in the lucrative offers in the form of the old woman penitent or in the “divine transformation” (TBJ, S.III, 14) of the young girl who passes by after a healthy swim in the beach just in a wrapper.
Jero: Burn out this lust for the daughters of Eve (TBJ, S.III, 15).

Even in prayer, Jero’s wavering mind, so unlike his professional etiquette, is controlled and corrected by the body of the woman penitent as “She is always the one to tell me that my mind is not on service...” (TBJ, S.III, 19). On a previous occasion, Jero confides to his new found assistant Chume as follows:

Jero: ...This morning alone I have been thrice in conflict with the daughters of discord. First there was... no, never mind that. There is another who crosses my path every day. Goes to swim just over there and then waits for me to be in the midst of my meditation, before she swings her hips across here, flaunting her near nakedness before my eyes... (TBJ, S.III, 25).

Now, if meditation is conceived as a bodily act that ensures a complete, in fact, deliberate negation of sensuality, performed with closed eyes with a clear conscience, irrespective of the mental vacillations and ratiocinations that seem to distract the mind set out to enrich the soul by establishing a metaphysical connection between the body with the flow of the universe, then, one can easily frame and predict the course and intensity of Jero’s meditation. Jero’s meditation is more prone to the affectation of his senses and is easily distracted by the ‘presence’ of the near naked female body that provides him with an orgiastic bliss rather than any spiritual enrichment which Jero claims to be more lethal yet counter-productive. It can therefore be maintained that Soyinka uses body politics not just to expose the seeming contradictions of gender, but to strike the right chord in order to establish the gullibility of the male body which the study have previously termed as the “situational hazards of gender”.
In the sequel to this play, entitled *Jero’s Metamorphosis*, the idea of body politics is more attuned to the political body of Africa and thus the dichotomies of gender are somewhat understated. The depiction of the framed picture of a “uniformed figure” in the stage direction and the idea that even the diocese are no longer governed by civilian politicians is a glib reminder of the political turn of events in the country after the era of colonialism. The play sarcastically presents the post-colonial African political climate reeked with violence especially in the newly fashioned means of public execution offering a grand spectacle. Introducing the reader to the vogue of execution spectatorship, Soyinka seems to offer a close interpretative angle in his Foreword to his play *Opera Wonyosi* of the onus that writers should take upon in reflecting both the decadence and moral fecundity of a given society with equal vigour and moral earnestness:

> Equally it is necessary that art should expose, reflect, indeed magnify the decadent, rotted under-belly of a society that has lost its direction, jettisoned all sense of values and is careering down a precipice as fast as the latest artificial boom can take it. Was, or was this not a period of public executions which provided outing occasions for families, complete with cool drinks, ice-cream, akara\(^{12}\), sandwiches and other picnickers’ delight?” (Soyinka, 298, 1998).

In the play, Jero’s remark on the discovery of the “secret past” of his fellow prophets is an indication that the present political situation does not accord any dignity in the vocation of the church officials who can be equally critical in the eyes of the law. The shift from the early obduracy and pride in the profession to an intimidating prospect in the post-colonial scenario is what afflicts Jero, revealing at the same time to the reader, Soyinka’s snide
remarks and bitter criticism of the local politicians and power-mongers filling in the
shoes of the colonisers. Jero states:

Jero: We could do with the elevation to eternity of some of our dearly
beloved brother prophets on this beach, and if they choose the way of the
hangman’s noose or elect to take the latest short cut to heaven facing a firing
squad at the Bar Beach Show\textsuperscript{13}, who are we to dispute such a divine solution?

\textit{(JM, S.I, 41-42)}.

This statement highlights the nature of the “latest short cut to heaven” in which violence
itself has become a mode of popular enjoyment. Soyinka in fact could not comprehend the
ideological base of a political system that has taken resort to such raw form of violence and
in turn made it a means of family outing. Call it the pretentious nature of the Africans to see
themselves in the light of their colonial masters or their delusion to accord themselves the
rare privilege of competing with Western modernity, the issues raised in this dialogue
leaves a lot for the reader to ponder and assess. If the authenticity of Soyinka’s assertion
cited previously is taken for granted, then in no way can one dismiss the logical
presumptions of Nigerian modernity as being steeped in violence occasionally fabricating
the concept of political justice, if any. Talking of modernity, the fourth chapter of this study
focuses on what aspect Soyinka exposes the African situation—the validity, viability and
authenticity of which is guaranteed by forging an identity which is both modern and
traditional.

As a counter to this perspective, one can say that it indicates Soyinka’s artistic expression
to bring forth the helplessness of the Nigerians to stand against such severe disciplining
mechanism through a medium that is quite akin to the execution spectacle. But the question
is—to what extent such a medium is ‘similar’; the only connection being the nature of spectatorship. The study would therefore like to argue that theatre spectacle and scaffold spectacle though entails public participation, it is the former and not the latter spectacle that accords “space” to the audience to question and challenge by titillating his/her verstehen. The latter form of spectacle is highly political, the contours of which is unchallengeable and even irrevocable. It sets a standard according to which the victims are sentenced while the crowd stands mute and passive to “see” the spectacle. On the other hand, theatre is a communal mode of enjoyment in which the audience has been granted the overseas right to “make” meaning in the midst of the performance. Given the greater degree of difference in “seeing” and “making meaning”, it can be well argued that Soyinka does not want the reader play the role of the second fiddle; rather he allows the reader a space that would allow him/her not just to “see” the performance but to “make” sense out of it by interpreting the signs, symbols and even the logic of the act. Therefore, the counter argument would prove to be quite parochial and lopsided as it does not engage the audience in the meaning making process.

The political climate of Nigeria being infested with military dictatorship frustrates all meaning of freedom, liberty and personal integrity; yet, in the play, Jero proclaims political resolutions as “divine solution”. This is a clear elaboration of the body politic fabricated by Soyinka to show mass acceptance of state enforced violence. If Louis Althusser’s notion of the ideological state apparatus is taken into consideration, then Jero’s statement illuminates the meek surrender of the Nigerians in the face of coercive power. Soyinka however is not seeking the facile tag of a Marxist activist in his political engagements; he is in fact trying
to uphold the picture of Nigerian reality in the post-colonial period in front of a global audience.

As mentioned earlier, in the play *Jero’s Metamorphosis*, Soyinka deftly fuses and juxtaposes the body politics while elaborating the ramifications and nature of the political body of Africa. Jero convenes a clandestine meeting of all brother prophets to discuss what course of action they should adopt if all their assets are to be confiscated by the new authority. It is quite ironic that most of these prophets did their time in prison on petty charges of theft. Therefore, the reader is shocked to find Jero’s diplomatic and democratic way of handling his affairs and more so in his insistence on non-violence:

    Jero: Violence will not help us. I am calling a meeting tonight at which all
    these matters will be discussed (*JM*, S.I, 46-47).

Intriguingly, it is Jero who manages to win the favour of Rebecca, the ex-secretary to the Chief Eviction Officer who in turn provides him with substantial official evidence to use as a measure of checks and balance whenever favourable circumstances prevail. Later, Jero not only uses the evidence as a potential weapon of political blackmailing but steps ahead in demanding certain privileges. The new trend of public execution in the Bar Beach Show deprives Jero and his peers their control of the beaches jeopardising their business of deceit and it is this deprivation that compels Jero to deploy cunning strategies to usurp power with the aid of Rebecca. Here, the reader discovers the unconditional desire of power be it at any cost and the yearning of the Nigerians to usurp power. It also throws light on the psychological bearings of the Nigerians who had to bear the brunt of political subjugation now manifesting it duly in return. And speaking of the psychological, Soyinka in *The Open*
Sore of A Continent states that psychological violence is “a fitting intraparty prelude to the physical violence” (italics mine) (Soyinka, 1997, 103).

Soyinka presents Rebecca’s character as gullible who falls easy prey to the machinations of Jero especially by dint of his theological tantrums. The operational base of body politics begins anew much in the manner of The Trials of Brother Jero in Soyinka’s embodying the voice of the Lord through the female body. This is a significant semiotic strategy adopted by Soyinka as he is equally concerned to script out a foundational rhetoric of gender while exposing the political scenario of Nigeria in a sarcastic light. The novelty in the idea of using the female body replicating the voice of the Lord is in fact quite deliberate as Soyinka is bent upon showing the imperatives and consequences of power politics deployed in terms of both the gender. Rebecca says;

Rebecca: The Lord speaks in me. I am the mouthpiece of his will (JM, S.I, 53).

This statement is however made in the ‘absence’ of Jero who has earlier initiated her into his fold of religious deliberation. She often enters into a trance in spiritual ecstasy which makes her disposition quite pious deserving awe and respect. Jero’s so-called ‘absence’ grants Rebecca the opportunity to manipulate the penitents and allows her the freedom to assert her voice of power—“mouthpiece of his will”. Soyinka deftly twists the angle of performance in his stage directions which now shows the raw form of the female body instinctively roused up in religious excitement.
She approaches the EXECUTIVE OFFICER with outstretched arms as if to embrace him. He retreats round the room but she follows him. She gets progressively ‘inspired’ (JM, S.I, 53).

The intent on Soyinka’s part is undoubtedly comic as it is quite unnatural to find a woman going after a male; to counter which the male body is seen to be in flight for safety. This ridiculous portrayal of the male body is a reminder of the violence that it administers on the female body in case of rape. Soyinka brilliance lies in highlighting this issue in a sardonic light.

Now, let us analyse this same scenic depiction more closely in the light of performance which is what theatre or for that matter stage directions is all about. From the performative angle, Rebecca’s character assumes importance because it is she who previously stated her annoyance for office-gendered politics and sexual harassment in her boss’s act of ogling that finally compelled her to quit her job. But in the excited state, the same body is driven by the urge or the desire of embracing the Executive Officer who in this case is a male and a complete stranger. The Executive Officer’s act of retreating and his attempts to break free from the “unbreakable embrace” (53) of Rebecca symbolically suggests the gradual transformation dawned upon Rebecca. Quite literally, it is more of a transfiguration than transformation if the behavioural symptoms are taken into account. The notion of transformation should neither be limited nor validated by the emphasis on spiritual excitement alone; on a deeper level, it is a ‘metamorphosis’ of the female body now privy to the animal instinct which is so often the characteristic feature in the case of the male body.
Notwithstanding the degree of violence in Nigeria and as that of in the plays, it is worth noting Soyinka’s statement that “a play, a novel, a poem, a painting or any other creative composition is not a thesis on the ultimate condition of man” (Soyinka, 298, 1998). Indeed so. The play is assessed in this light befitting the portrayal of a political scenario of a given time in a given place and hence should not be strictly categorised as a general commentary.

However, the crux of the play revolves around the ‘metamorphosis’ of Jero which also replicates a metamorphosis of the present African post-colonial condition. As against Isaac’s lamenting the “good old days” (JM, S.II, 68) of the civilian parliamentarians, Jero’s desire is somewhat overarching the political paradigm. Soyinka foreshadows Jero’s metamorphosis at the beginning of the play in the form of the framed figure of a military general in his room. It is seen that unlike the other prophets attending the “Memorandum of the Cabinet Office to the Board of Tourism. Proposals to turn the Bar Beach into a National Public Execution Amphitheatre”, Jero is no longer concerned with the idea of gaining the trust of the authority for “spiritual monopoly” (JM, S.III, 74). On the contrary, Jero adopts lethal strategies such as the formation of the new Church of the Apostolic Salvation Army of the Lord that would finally catapult him into the political arena. Again, the allocation of portfolios, though extremely comic, is an indication of the forthcoming religion sanctified military regime of Jero. The military uniforms serve to establish the semiotic properties by convincing the audience of the nature and intent of such a regime. Moreover, Jero’s insistence to be designated as General, his allotting the post of Colonel of Church of the Apostolic Salvation Army (CASA) to Rebecca, Lieutenant-Colonel to Caleb and Sergeant to the “all-muscle-and-no-brain petty criminal” Ananaias are significant pointers that
establishes the idea of the formation of a military confederacy of ex-robbers, rapists, thieves and cut-throats under Jero’s leadership.

Another conspicuous aspect of such a military formation lies in the urgency expressed in the Memorandum for an amphitheatre of public execution as is the vogue in the post-colonial Nigerian situation. It is here that Jero’s political ideology shrouded under the guise of religious sacrament dons off its mask in favouring the latest fashion of execution by a firing squad in administering justice. Jero’s idea behind providing a grand spectacle of law-enforced violence in an amphitheatre can be seen as Soyinka’s critique of the infamous trend exemplified in the Roman amphitheatre originally set for public trials of slaves and gladiators. Jero’s final metamorphosis into a uniform-clad General towards the end of the play boldly scripts the Nigerian political crisis. Jero’s final statement regarding the change of his profession is quite phenomenal:

    Jero: After all, it is the fashion these days to be a desk General (JM, S.III, 86).

Justifying the need to counter the preponderant obscenities that daily assail Africans, nay, Nigerian lives pitted against an abysmal “maggot-infested” (Soyinka, 300, 1998) political reign, Soyinka states that he does not intend to give any ‘intellectual’ audience the comfort of seeing their material situation as the inevitable consequence of their socio-historical condition. On the contrary, what Soyinka tries can be seen as an attempt to lay bare the African incongruities, their propensity to be swayed and lured by power towards a negative end. Unfortunately, the calculative risk involved in the process rests chiefly on miscalculation due to which strategies turn lethal, resolutions turn violent and policies never work out as planned. It can therefore be affirmed that the comprehensive intellectual
blunder of the Africans in understanding power synonymously with violence is the moot cause of their political instability and existential crisis. Soyinka’s next play *A Play of Giants* is based upon this critique where he tries to expose the incorrigible standards of the African dictators.

Much in the manner of *King Baabu*, Soyinka’s *A Play of Giants* (1984) is a scathing attack on African dictatorship, and can be seen as a personal diatribe on the then Ugandan dictator Idi Amin whom Soyinka prefers to call a “certified psychopath” (Soyinka, 4, 1999). It parodies the entire concept of world peace and globalisation, the culture of corruption in African societies and the mock-heroic nature of African dictators who meet in the US Embassy of the United Nations. To a great extent, the play is crafted in the lines of Soyinka’s ideological belief that “...longer a people are subjected to the brutality of power, the longer, in geometric proportion, is the process of recovery and re-humanization” (Soyinka, 6, 1999). Unlike *King Baabu*, Soyinka here purposefully tones down the level and intensity of humour in order to unmask the trend in African politics which is seen to be a blind adherence to anything Western as grand and sublime.

In *A Play of Giants*, the idea of body politics works in two ways—the political body (represented by four African dictators) of the African Union at the United States which is built on Soyinka’s challenge to “the most blatant, time-dishonoured methods of African dictators who fail to understand that a people must be led in dignity, not dragged on their knees and bellies on the pathway to social transformation” (Soyinka, 14, 2004), and the postcolonial black African ‘body’ contesting itself before a global audience. The play becomes quite intriguing because it is the black ‘body’ on the stage which again serves to
be the prime agent in conveying the sense of violence, and while thus engaged, forms a
discourse of power whose ideological base is itself defined and directed by violence.

The play begins with a White sculptor working on a life-size group sculpture of the three
‘crowned heads’—Benefacio Gunema (for President for Life Macias Nguema of Equatorial
Guinea), Emperor Kasco (for Emperor for Life (ex) Jean-Baptiste Bokassa of the Central
African Republic) and Field-Marshall Kamini (for Field-Marshall El-Haji Dr Idi Amin of
Uganda)—each a dictator of his respective country. They are later joined by the fourth
dictator—General Barra Tuboum (for Life President Mobotu Sese Koko of Congo
Kinshasa). The stage directions give the idea of ‘posing’ by these crowned heads which
again imparts the idea of a performance within a performance. The ‘stiffness’ generated in
such a pose is a performative act as it endows a certain restrictive gesture in the performing
body. To add further, the sculpture of the three ‘crowned heads’ is highly suggestive of a
‘double representation’. The stage direction explicitly demands such a position:

_The ground floor is a lounge which has been turned into a studio. A
SCULPTOR is working at a life-size group sculpture of the three ‘crowned
heads’, on which any likeness is hardly apparent. When the sitters speak,
they do so stiffly, (highlighting mine) in an effort to retain their poses (APG.
11, Part-I)._  

The ‘stiffness’ of the body on stage in its representational mode testifies pride and
arrogance, the discourse of which is brought out by the performing body as it has the
potential to form its own discourse via performance. For instance, a stern look, bulging
eyes and a puffed up chin are natural indicators or ‘signs’ that conveys such an attitude. At
the same time, this ‘posing’ body caters to the need of phenomenological ‘presence’ and
eventually fulfils it as reflected in the mode of double representation. Alexandra Howson in her book *The Body in Society* succinctly elaborates the dynamics of embodiment by arriving at a synthesis of both the semiotic and phenomenological properties pertaining to a spectatorial project. She dissects the line between the subjective and the objective body of the actor and opines that it is only through embodiment that the audience comes to know the body as an object first and then as felt and experienced. The ontological assumptions of the body politics through the representational framework thus gets vindicated as it is almost impossible to conceive of the ‘body’ without it *functionality*. Soyinka appears to add a further twist to the body politics as he is not presenting ordinary bodies but bodies of power. This also seems to justify in a way the theatrical paradigm which he adopts to expose the postcolonial ‘hubris’ of African politics.

Kamini’s first vocal assertion in the play is rooted in violence as he makes a gestural indication to the coterie of African dictators regarding his stance when he is beset with political upheavals:

Kamini: Only one thing to do to subversive—khrr! *(A meaningful gesture across his throat).* I used to have subversives too. The Western press like to call them guerrillas. I say, I have no guerrillas in my country. Only bandits.

We call them *kondo*. I catch any *kondo*, I make him smell his mother’s cunt *(APG. Part-I, 12).*

The dialogue mentioned above carries forth the performative nature of violence. The term ‘khrr’ has an onomatopoeic effect of the gurgling sound. For instance, an animal slaughtered for a ritual. The gestural reference is indicative of such an assumption as the audience can easily make out the anatomical cross-reference implicated in such
performance. The efficacy of the gesture—hand cutting/crossing the throat—indicates the slitting of the throat which is asserted more effectively with the vocal assistance of the glottal sound ‘khrr’. This is violence substantially represented by the body on stage. The audience instantly conjures up the horrid picture of violence and finally corresponds to the glottal sound not just as an auditory engagement but also as a crucial signifier about the lot of the people who tend to get ‘subversive’ under the reign of dictators. The idea suggested here regarding the importance of the sign system in performance is more succinctly summarised by Jiri Veltrusky in an essay titled “Dramatic Text as a Component of Theatre” (1941):

In Theatre, the sign created by the actor tends, because of its overwhelming reality, to monopolise the attention of the audience at the expense of the immaterial meanings conveyed by the linguistic sign; it tends to divert attention from the text to the voice performance, from speeches to physical actions and even to the physical appearance of the stage figure, and so on (Veltrusky, 115).

However, one must note that it is the performing body that will have the liberty to accommodate the audience with the necessary ultimatum in unearthing the meaning of the performance. This is because the meaning of the performative utterance ‘khrr’ will be basically backed up by the body’s handling of the gestural reference. That is to say, whether the act of cutting/crossing the throat is slow assisted with the prolongation of the glottal sound or whether it is too fast. The politics of the body in performance renders the representation to be analysed from performative angles—the slowness of the hand will intensify the conceptual notion of violence, inducing in the audience the emblematic sign of
fear and torture whereas a *fast hand act* will reduce the horror to be just an act of punishment. Considering the fact that theatre is often conceived in the form of an ongoing reciprocal relationship between the actor and the audience, the politics of the body therefore impinges a “metatextural reflexivity” (borrowing Schechner’s phrase) on the part of the audience to unearth the multiple layers of signification in the meaning making process (Schechner, 1988, 19). Thus, the dexterous application of body politics in the form of performative gesture challenges all forms of hermeneutical signs of understanding.

In a similar fashion, Soyinka seems to toy with the idea of theatre semiotics when he accords dialogues to his characters that are often accompanied by vivid gestural references. It can be argued that Soyinka tries to juxtapose the discourse of power with the discourse of violence in evolving a discourse of the body. Soyinka adroitly captures this postcolonial dilemma of power-mongering in the representation of four notorious and infamous military dictators of Africa and effectively demonstrates the standard political strategies adopted by them to wrest power. Kamini’s torturing the Chairman of Bugara Central Bank by flushing his face in the toilet due to his failure in procuring substantial foreign loans from the World Bank, General Tuboum’s pillaging and raping the women of his own country with the aid of the notorious gang of stripped leopards of Mbangi-Gwela, General Gunema’s seducing the wife of a sentenced victim in lieu of amnesty and consequently experiencing the elixir, the real ‘taste’ (*APG*. Part-II, 70) of power and finally garrotting her are all instances in point. In *The Open Sore of a Continent*, Soyinka states,

> Discipline, or rather “dis’plin”, was their slogan, and this was to be manifested in all sorts of public motions, such as inculcating the culture of queuing; patriotism, which mandated flying the national flag even on
roadside shacks that sold nothing but oranges and peanuts; sanitation, cleaning up the environment; fiscal control (you went to jail if you forgot some loose foreign coins in your pocket and failed to declare them at airport)...and so on....Their notion of “dis’plin” was not to take offenders to the local magistrate court or even sanitation tribunals but to make them do the frog jump (Soyinka, 74, 1997).

*A Play of Giants* is an outstanding document of postcolonial African violence especially due to the direct reference to the polemical notion of the grand imperial categorization of Africans as cannibals. Soyinka’s vociferous challenging of African politics gets ample reflection when he accords the character of General Tuboum with cannibal habits. In fact, the latter personally acknowledges this when he describes how he had served the rebels to his gang of stripped leopards.

Tuboum: You see me here, do you not? Of course it is finished. Crushed. All the ring leaders?—Tsch! *(He makes expressive gesture.*) Except three. I brought them with me to exhibit before the General Assembly...After public confession, perhaps we serve them up at cocktail party *(APG. Part-I, 28-29)*.

The term ‘Tsch!’ is again a ‘sign’—an important referent that establishes the grand project of semiotics, and illustrates the idea of a neat intermixture of sound and action. Much like the glottal sound ‘khrr’ discussed earlier, the plateo-alveolar affricate ‘Tsch’ suggest a clapping/clapping of the hand which conveys to the audience the act of ‘crushing’ the rebellion. It is again the ‘body’ that seeks to affirm the discourse of violence by replicating the historicity of the act in terms of gesture. The sign system ordains a specific interpretation as neither the rebels nor the act of crushing them are represented on the stage.
The politics of the body here justifies its *functionality* by engaging with the dynamics of spectatorship with due recourse to the mode of “sensory codes”¹⁴ (to borrow Claude Lévi-Strauss’s term). In his influential book, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (2001), Rustom Bharucha attaches the importance of the verbal medium in the context of communication, that is, language translated and modified through performance:

‘Theatre language’ opens up a totally different set of propositions and possibilities, in so far as ‘the word’ in theatre is never entirely literary, but mediated through the bodies and voices of actors in a specific *mise en scene*, wherein the meaning of a particular theatrical representation is shaped, enunciated, and embodied. Language in theatre exists only in a state of translation on the stage (Bharucha, 85).

Furthermore, the highly contested categorisation of Africans along the line of the savages is indicated by the expression ‘serve them up at cocktail party’. Reflecting on Claude Lévi-Strauss’s idea of ascertaining merit to the savage who tries to establish a bridge between the cyclical system of nature with that of the human world by resorting to totemism as a parallel to his/her conception of the universe and not as a fall out of his/her illiterate biology, Clifford Geertz in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* opines,

Savage (“wild”, “undomesticated”) modes of thought are primary in human mentality. That are what we all have in common (357).

This statement not only alludes to William Golding’s observation in *Lord of the Flies* that human beings are a bundle of nerves, and in favourable environment they show their true colour but also broadens the range of anthropological certitude which can no longer be
defined as the apparent study of the customs, institutions and belief systems governing a select section of people.

The act of ‘serving’ conjoins the possibility of visualising human flesh as a dish, quite fashionable to be presented in cocktail parties. No doubt it is a deliberate exaggeration by Soyinka to demonise the prevalent military regimes without any intention to set a paradigmatic example of primordializing the African subject as an anthropological object of inquiry. Nevertheless, one cannot overrule this textual evidence as a kind of cultural sacrilege. The issue is heightened further when General Tuboum reasons out the viability of such acts:

Tuboum: My elite troops must be fearless and mysterious...They train in secret, far from prying eyes of the common herd. Their secrecy is their power, like the hair of Samson; the eye of any stranger at the mysteries of their self-preparation is a corrosion of that power. They kill such strangers, and they eat them.

Kasco: Eat them!

Tuboum: Eat them---white, black or yellow. Is it not the only way to ensure the re-absorption of that power of yourself which has been sucked away by profaning eyes?...

Kamini: Ah yes? You take many prisoners?

Tuboum: Only a handful, enough for the celebration feast of my stripped leopards (APG. Part-I, 29-30).
The idea of consuming bodies—white, black or yellow—by the stripped leopards serves to be an ironical counterblast to the colonial hegemony which has ordained such an identity to the Africans in the first place. Professor Batey’s comment is a justification of this colonial blunder:

Batey: ...There is no such thing as a monster—you if nobody else, should be the first to acknowledge that. You know it is colonial history which must bear full responsibility for all seeming aberrations in African leadership” (APG. Part-I, 67).

That the black African body, apart from the exaggerate notion of cannibalism and the horrid image that it conveys, can devour the differentiated bodies (white, black or yellow) is a brilliant exposition of the body politics. Likewise, Soyinka introduces the rather controversial notion of African cannibalism in Madmen and Specialists where Dr. Bero’s father seems to entertain the idea of legalising it as a cuisine delicacy. The element of exaggeration reaches its climax in Soyinka’s investing Dr. Bero with a similar outlook who in spite of being the “specialist”, wholeheartedly approves of it. The following conversation is an illustration:

PRIEST: I knew it. A stubborn man, once he gets hold of an idea. You won’t believe it but actually he said to me, I’m going to try and persuade those fools not to waste all that meat. Mind you he never could stand wastage, could he? I remember he used to wade into you both if he caught you wasting anything. But human flesh, why, that’s another matter altogether.

Bero: But why, Pastor. It’s quite delicious, you know.

PRIEST: Just what I say. It’s... what did you say?
Bero (reaches out and pulls out the PRIEST’S cheek). This. Delicious.

PRIEST (struggles free). You’re joking, of course.

Bero: No. Your friend will confirm it when he comes.

PRIEST (increasingly horrified). You mean he...

Bero: No, not him. He never meant anything. At least, not that way. But we found it delicious just the same.

PRIEST: You?

Bero: I give you the personal word of a scientist. Human flesh is delicious.

Of course, not all parts of the body. I prefer the balls myself. (Highlighting mine)

PRIEST (vehemently). I don’t believe you.

Bero: You don’t? Well, then, why don’t you stay to dinner?

PRIEST: Dinner? (cheering up). Of course. I see all you want is an argument like your old man. Delighted of course. Only too delighted to oblige... (He is stricken by a sudden doubt). Er... dinner... did you say dinner?

Bero: Dinner. I came well-laden with supplies.

(The PRIEST glances at Bero’s bulging briefcase lying nearby, gulps). (Part One, 250-251).

Although the Priest flees the scene soon after citing the petty excuse of a Christening, what becomes intriguing in the aforesaid conversation is Dr. Bero’s vouching for cannibalism is supplemented by a professional justification for consuming human flesh. The act of
‘gulping’ by the Priest is a semiotic sign of abhorrence as well as horror because his rational faculty could neither possibly entertain nor comprehend the idea of a ‘scientific mind’ prescribing the qualitative merits of such an obnoxious habit. It is equally striking to analyse Soyinka’s stance as he is not presenting a westerner’s contempt but that of an insider’s disgust replicated in the gestural indication of the ‘gulp’. A little later in the play, in the manner of explaining the logic behind such a habit-formation, Dr. Bero clearly mentions to Sister Bero that he is not thriving to sabotage the sanctity of God by turning into an evil; on the contrary, it is his way of “understanding power” in its truest sense.

Bero: He told us. (Pause. He laughs suddenly). But why not? Afterwards I said why not? What is one flesh from another? So I tried it again, just to be sure of myself. It was the first step to power you understand. Power in its purest sense. The end of inhibitions. The conquest of all the weakness of your too human flesh with all its sentiment (MAS, 252).

Apart from the logical fallacy of such an understatement, it is quite apparent that Dr. Bero strives for power to excel in his field. Granted that corruption is inevitable with the attainment of power, Bero too in the psychological sense becomes a victim of his own misconception that a healthy consumption of human flesh would entail raw, undisputed power. The masochistic underpinnings of such power-mongering even allow Cripple to virtually fabricate notions of violence and torture:

Cripple: I wish I had the power. Gives a man a sense of power to watch others twitch like so many broken worms. Broken worms, ah, that’s a fine thing to come from my mouth (MAS, 258).
Instances of similar debated habits like cannibalism are profusely elaborated in Soyinka’s *Opera Wonyosi* where Emperor Boky, infuriated at his Aide’s lacking concern of maintaining royal decorum, orders to cut his tongue off and be sent to Idi Amin as a token of friendship.

Boky: Drag him out. Out! Wait. Stop. Cut out his tongue and send that silenced item to my friend Idi Amin, with my compliments. No. Stop. Send Amin the entire wretch and add that his tongue is not to be trusted. He’ll know what to do. Take him out (OW, 3. I., 332).

The obsession with power that drives the African political giants in the play gets illustrated in the following dialogues:

Kamini: ...A man comes to life, in middle of battle, not so? He feel power beating through his blood, like madness...

Kasco: ...Power comes only with the death of politics. That is why I choose to become emperor. I place myself beyond politics. At the moment of my coronation I signal to the world that I transcend the intrigues and mundaneness of politics (APG. Part-I, 31).

Now, both Kamini’s and Kasco’s remarks gives the gist or the summation of the political body of the African nation. While Kamini’s idea of power can be psychologically interpreted as an uncontrolled outpouring of the repressed *will-to-power* (borrowing Nietzsche’s phrase) the traces of which remain etched in the palimpsest of the colonial psyche, Kasco’s idea of power seems to give a hilarious picture of misappropriation of political ideology. However, it is this hilarity that has been the driving force of African politics since her independence as witnessed in the cases of political crisis afflicting almost
all African nations. Stressing upon the prevailing frenzy of violence in Nigeria, Soyinka categorically defines the Nigerian socio-political space as exhibiting a ‘killer factor’. He states,

I should have remembered the Nigerian killer factor. Simply defined, it is the stressful bane of the mere act of critical thought within a society where power and control remain the playthings of imbeciles, psychopaths and predators (YMSFD, 12).

Soyinka’s idea of representing the black body in an obvious state of fracture comes full circle in the Secretary-General’s remark at the outlandish wish of Kamini to place his life-size statue in the Delegates’ Passage of the United Nations. However, by foregrounding the possibilities of both parody and self-representation, Soyinka nonetheless reinvests the black African body with a power and a presence:

Secretary-General: When the ambassador spoke to me about statues, I somehow thought she meant statuettes.

Gunema: Statuettes? What that?

Secretary-General: Small statues—(Indicating) like that. The kind of small busts which are made in factories. For distribution (APG. Part-II, 48).

The very act of ‘indicating’ by the Secretary-General tends to limit the black body and dwarf its potential both physically and conceptually. However, this reductive act is only directed against the black ‘political’ body in the form of the four dictators. It is argued that by investing a plethora of semiotic references, Soyinka tries to ‘dehumanise’ the political body of Africa which is sequestered with hate and factionalism. Here, the ‘indication’ can
be seen as a performative act done with both hands—one cupping the other—to convey the meaning first to the other body on the stage and then to the audience. This act of ‘cupping’ (which is in fact a matter of assumption) clearly demonstrates the Secretary-General’s biased estimation of the African political body, here personified in the form of the four dictators. Considering the prospects of such an analysis, it can also be maintained that this performative gesture not only objectify/commodify (for conceiving it to be an industrial product, small busts) the black body but also serve to be a reminder of what it (that is, the black body) means to the ‘Other’ body. The Other body in question is the political body of the United Nations chiefly dominated by Western superpowers.

Theatre is thus fundamentally concerned with the human body and this fact has hitherto served as a vantage point in an analysis of the politics of the body on stage. Soyinka brilliantly exploits the dramatic genre to scrutinise the quotidian world in its variegated manifestations. The conceptual notion of the ‘body’ in theatre is necessarily abstract but it is an abstraction based on the idea of a fleshy, palpable reality (Conroy, 9). Elaborating on the functionality of the body, Konstantin Stanislavsky in his preface to An Actor’s Work says,

We are faced not only with the actor’s invisible, creative mind but also his visible, palpable body. That is real, material, and to work on it you need the ‘drudgery’ without which no art is produced at all (Stanislavsky, xxvi).

It is this ‘drudgery’ nonetheless that this chapter has sought to explore so far which has the potential to elevate even the most banal performance to the heights of the aesthetic. The ‘body’ is always an unstable signifier and therefore dialogic and ambivalent. Thus, theatre
with all its cultural baggage and contestation offers significant ways and means in the understanding of the ‘body’.

End Notes:

1. In his essay, “The Eye of Power”, Foucault writes about the power of the individual/subjective gaze in a relational fixity as “…an inspecting Gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (Foucault, 1977: 155). For more, see M. Foucault’s “The Eye of Power” in C. Gordon Ed. And Trans., Power/Knowledge, New York: Pantheon, 1977.

2. This is basically due to the conviction that drama or theatre in its epistemological entirety is always meant to be staged in front of an audience.

3. Bordo makes the necessary distinction between the idea of the ‘body politic’ and that of ‘the politics of the body’. She traces the use of the former back to the days of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca and Macchiavelli where the idea of the body politic metaphorically suggests the conception of the state or society as a human body. “…the different organs and parts symbolizing different functions, needs, social constituents, forces and so forth—the head or soul for the sovereign, the
blood for the will of the people, the nerves for the system of rewards and punishments and so forth”.
Again, she acknowledges the recent appropriation of the phrase ‘politics of the body’ along feminist
lines, “…human body as itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped
and marked by histories and practices of containment and control—from foot-binding and corseting
to rape and battering, to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilization, unwanted pregnancy and
…explicit commodification”. (Bordo, 251). For more details, see Susan Bordo’s “Feminism,
Foucault and the Politics of the Body” in Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (eds.) Feminist Theory

4 The essay was delivered as a lecture at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, on the
occasion of the performance of King Baabu at the Baxter Theatre in September 2002. For more, see
Soyinka’s “King Baabu and the Renaissance Vision” in John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola
Olaniyan (eds.) African Drama and Performance, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana

5 All quotations and references from the plays King Baabu and A Play of Giants will be henceforth
referred by the initials as KB and APG.

7 By “situational hazards”, I mean the subjective experience of a “lack” which is experienced by
both the sexes when they confront each other—that is, the beauty and charm of the female body
endowed with well developed breasts and curves and the muscular male body endowed with a
proportionate phallus—the potential symbol of authority and power.

8 Devi Tripura—an allusion to her own triple nature as a maiden (Bala), as a fecund woman
(Tripura) and as a post-menstruating woman (Tripura Bhairavi). For more, see Michael Magee’s

In *King Baabu*, Maariya’s character naturally befits the ‘Kali’ image especially in her frenetic disposition in matters of state politics. Moreover, her extrovert nature feeding on the extreme limits of narcissism and sadomasochism, her denigrating Baabu in terms of sexuality/physical proportion and her vying for a bloodbath with Rajinda’s wife Moriya are natural pointers that justify such a comparative assessment.

By the phrase “informal cultural embeddedness” I mean to suggest the cultural baggage that each spectator brings along with him/her in assessing a theatrical performance. It is informal because it varies from person to person even if they have the same cultural affiliation or share the same cultural roots.

Bean cakes.

Bar Beach Show is the popular expression used to denote the latest trend of public execution in Lagos, capital of Nigeria.

Claude Levi-Strauss used the term ‘Sensory codes’ for “the enlistment of each of the senses to develop a vocabulary and grammar founded on it to produce “messages”—for instance, different types of incense burned at different times in a performance communicate different meanings, gestures and facial expressions are assigned meanings with reference to emotions and ideas to be communicated, soft and loud sounds have conventional meaning, etc.” (Turner, 23, 1988).
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