CHAPTER II

Betrayal in the City
Francis Imbuga has emerged a powerful voice in East African drama in English dealing with the socio-political problems in post-independent Kenya. Kenyans, like other Africans, expected that independence would free them from all negative aspects of the colonial rule. However, their hopes were shattered as the hard-achieved political independence culminated in the vices like neo-colonialism, nepotism, corruption, repression, cultism and dictatorship. It is not an exaggeration to say that the same situation prevailed in most of the countries of the African continent. This reality, must have prompted Francis Imbuga to write his political plays, which almost reflect the same situation presenting the similar themes.

In this way, the other African playwrights like Wole Soyinka and Ngugi, are also opposed to the post-independent regimes which were tyrannical and corrupt. In the words of N. Pratima:

*The African writers have also expressed their resentment against the corruption in the independent African states, and they have protested against the authoritarian forces which are trying to misuse the freedom gained from the colonial powers.*

*Betrayal in the City* is an incisive, thought provoking examination of the problems of independence and freedom in post-colonial African states. Kafira is an independent African state, which is ruled by Boss, a dictator. Absence of popular government, suppression of freedom and subjugation of
citizens by the ruling class form the theme of the play. Kafira is a microcosm of the continent in which vices like nepotism, corruption, neo-colonialism and dictatorship have taken a firm hold. It is the dictatorial governance by Boss and his final overthrow along with his cohorts that form the focal point of the play.

_Betrayal in the City_ runs into two Acts. In Act one, scene one, one notices the description of a grave and its surroundings. As the curtain rises, Doga and Nina, the parents of Adika, a slain student leader, are in deep distress because they find their son's grave defiled. Adika, has been killed by the aides of Boss, the head of state of Kafira, for his participation in a student demonstration against the influx of expatriates into the country. The conversation of the old couple also reveals that their second son, Jusper, has also been arrested for _his becoming wild_ at the funeral, singing songs of vengeance. (p.10) He has been released after three months and is psychologically upset.

Doga and Nina suspect the killers of their son to be the culprits behind the defilement of the grave in a bid to burn the dead body, so that they can escape the vengeance of Adika's ghost. However Doga resolves:

_The ceremony must go on as planned. I do not want the spirits of the dead to turn wild with anger on account of a ceremony unperformed._ (p.9)

These words of Doga reveal the strength of African traditional roots.
It is at this moment, Jere and Mulili, the two soldiers now on duty enter the scene and declare, the ceremony is cancelled in the interest of peace (p. 14). Realising the injustice done to them, Jere permits the ceremony to take place much against the law. In course of their conversation, Jere reveals to Doga that his second son, Jusper, has also been arrested on the charges of murder of Chagaga, the sub-chief's son, whom he suspected of having shot Adika.

The next scene is set in a prison cell. Jere is thrown into prison for having violated the law in permitting Doga to perform the shaving ceremony. In the cell, he meets Mosese, a university Lecturer, who has been imprisoned by implicating him in possession, of an illegal drug, one kilogramme of opium. The actual reason for his imprisonment is his speech at Adika's funeral.

This only shows the rule of Boss is so callous that the people of Kafira do not have even freedom of speech. It also shows how even the intellectuals are crushed under the weight of neo-colonialism in their own country.

Askari, the prison warder, informs Mosese and Jere that the old parents of Jusper are found dead, and Jusper is going to be released. Jere and Mosese like to meet Jusper before his release. He also tells that a certain head of state is due to visit Kafira in a few weeks time. Boss has decided that a play be performed for the visiting head as part of his entertainment. He wants the play to be acted by prisoners. If the exercise is a success, he will release six hundred prisoners. But Moses does not like to act in the play because

20
that would be equivalent to kneeling in front of Boss and pleading for mercy. (p. 31)

However, Jere as a realist persuades Mosese to act in the play in order to rescue others from inevitable misery. (p. 30) He says:

Just think of those six hundred families that will be re-united. (p. 30)

This scene ends with Mosese becoming mad in a fit of rage against the cruel regime.

In scene three Jusper is full of revenge against Boss. He emotionally says:

How can I ever rest with the death of my entire family on my mind? (p. 37)

On the other hand, Regina, his girlfriend, thinks that it is almost impossible to succeed against Boss. She wants to adopt a soft line until the expected time comes near. She tries to reason with him reminding that he and her brother, Mosese, are her only friends left in the world. She advises them not to go for any hasty action that results in grief.

Even as they converse, Tumbo, a government official and Regina's landlord, arrives. He tells Regina that Boss has appointed him Chairman of the visitor's entertainment committee. He has ordered a play be staged as part of the entertainment. Regina introduces Jusper to him as a playwright. Immediately Tumbo asks him to write a play that will
Outline our achievements in black and white and ignore dark side of the picture. (p. 51)

He is so corrupt that he finalises Jusper's play will be selected and it will have a good potato in it. Incidentally, he reveals the cruel personality aspects of Boss.

At the beginning of the next scene, it is known that besides Tumbo the other government officials, Kabito, Nicodemo and Mulili are on the committee. They discuss the arrangements for the visit of a certain head of state. One can notice that their concentration is more on their share of money they get rather than on the arrangements. Mulili prides himself for getting tender for milk for which Kabito has desperately tried. The statement of Kabito not to take university students to be primary school kids for the play, angers Mulili. With his little knowledge of English, he thinks that Kabito has called him a primary school kid. He insists on an apology from Kabito, which the latter bluntly refuses.

Scene two, Act two, takes place outside the palace of Boss. It deals with Mulili poisoning the mind of Boss about Kabito in order to take revenge. Mulili says that Kabito has openly declared that Boss has robbed him of the milk tender and he has hidden millions in a foreign country. Boss grows furious and orders Mulili to come back and report to him that Kabito is silent. This scene ends with the discussion by the committee members about the sudden death of Kabito.
In the last scene, the stage is set for the final rehearsal of the play. When Jusper and Tumbo are busy making arrangements for rehearsals of the play, Boss takes them by surprise by his sudden arrival. When Boss enquires about the play, Jusper informs him that the title of the play is *Betrayal in the City*. It is about an army cadet who has been promoted to the rank of captain within six months of his enrolment. Boss orders the rehearsals to begin and he himself partakes in it in place of a character, who has fallen sick. But, when Tumbo says that the guns are not ready as the carpenter who has been given order, has not made the guns, Boss foolishly orders the three guards to place their guns on the floor near the actors, for props. Jere and Mosese, as part of the rehearsals, take hold of the guns and do not lose the opportunity. Jere threatens Boss to remain seated or he will shoot him. Immediately Mulili, for fear of life, holds Boss responsible for the misrule. Boss is surprised for the sudden development. But Jere says that they will not kill Boss because *Kafira needs each one of us you included*. (p. 76) Jusper takes the gun and shoots Mulili, declaring:

*I did it for Kafira. I did it for all of you people.* (p. 77)

The play ends with the appearance of the ghosts of Doga and Nina, the dead parents of Jusper.

No doubt, the playwright has succeeded in his attempt to expose the maladies of post-independent Africa. At the same time, the plot of the play suffers from certain improbabilities. For instance, the climax scene is so loosely constructed that one cannot believe the way the events turned in favour of the prisoners. The very idea of Boss to get the play enacted by the
prisoners which will signify national unity and will also show prisoners actively involved in nation building, appears to be ridiculous on the part of a dictator, who always threatens people by comparing himself with fire that burns them.

The rehearsal episode in which Jere and Mosese hold Boss at the gun point, is not preplanned and there is not even a single word in the play to convince the audience that they are going to carry out a coup. It is well-known in the play that Jere and his party's target is Boss, a dreaded dictator, with all sorts of vices. But when they get a golden opportunity to crush him, he is left with all honour for him. This appears very odd for a political plot, which normally believes in wild justice. The event in which Jere, after threatening Boss, like a tiger, himself becomes a deer in front of a tiger, is superfluous. He says:

*Your excellency, I now offer myself. Here, shoot me.* (p. 76)

This way the plot suffers from very conspicuous improbabilities.

In spite of the fact that none of the few characters in the play is not fully developed, all of them revolve round the powerful presentation of the themes of the evil effects of neo-colonialism and dictatorship. In the character of Jere, *Imbuga presents us with the most manifest illustration of his belief in man's ability to change.*

Jere, an ex-service man in the Kafiran army, witnesses the reality of the situation, when he is sent to restore law and order in his home village. At first, as the representative of the oppressive rule, he tells Doga and Nina that there will be no ceremony. But, in a few minutes, as a humanist, he comprehends
their agony and is for the ceremony to take place. He bitterly argues with Mulili:

I looked in that old woman's eyes and I saw the futility of calling ourselves citizens of Kafira. We must allow them even if it's against the law. (p. 18)

He is over ruled, arrested and thrown into a prison cell. There is fire outside, is his observation when he comes face to face with reality. He vows to fight against nepotism rampant in their society, represented by the policy of selective breeding ... progressive layers of humanity. He exercises pure optimism to neutralise the tremendous emotional feelings of Mosese about violence. Jere only says that things will change. He is very pragmatic to drive away the idealistic approach of Mosese when the latter says that he will remain loyal to his principles without any action to achieve them. He convinces Mosese, to act in the play:

Change will never come that way. You have to make up your mind to take part in that play. That way you will have an opportunity to meet face to face with Boss. That way, you will have given him something to feel ashamed of. (p. 32)

Mosese is a university lecturer, who is full of idealism and aspires to see developed Kafira, with citizens slowly emerging out of the mire of poverty. His first statement on his appearance is I have no front. (p. 7) He thinks that he is a man of principles and that he is prepared to die to defend his principles. He
campaigns for political reforms and has dreams of victory over Boss' regime. However, he does not have any fixed programme to achieve his aim. There is a striking similarity between Mosese's vision and that of Wamala in John Ruganda's *The Burdens*. They are dreamers who do not know how to really bring out a revolution. Thus, Mosese is a

*Lecturer languishing in despair in his prison cell,*

*waiting hopelessly for the birth of a savior.*

He does not believe in the theory of *selective breeding* and he declares:

*...blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.* (p. 31)

He is firm about his idea of opposition to the rule of Boss. He informs Jere:

*Buying my release by acting in front of a visiting head of state would be to betray our cause.* (p. 32)

Thus, he is more conscious of his principles in mere words rather than to transforming them into realities. He is frustrated with the way Uhuru (freedom) is misused by the dictators like Boss. He is reminiscent of the airman in W.B. Yeats'. *An Irish Airman Foresees his Death*, when he says:

*Our Kingdom had come at last, but no. It was all an illusion....Now we have nothing to look forward to. We have killed our past and busy killing the future.* (p.p. 31-32)
But the airman's despair reflects the futility of the struggle for political freedom for Ireland.

*The years to come seemed waste of breath,*

*A waste of breath the years behind*

*In balance with this life, this death.*

The character of Regina is portrayed in a delicate manner. She is the sister of Mosese and in heart opposed to Boss. But she is gentle and she cannot think that Boss can be overthrown by means of a coup. She has been severely beaten up by soldiers to force her to give false evidence against her own brother that he has been in possession of an illegal drug. In spite of this, she decides to meet Boss personally to secure the release of her brother, Mosese. In the process, she miraculously escapes from the sexual harassment of Boss. She doesn't want Jasper to talk of revenge and remain very calm. She tells him that if anything goes wrong they will be wiped out. She represents soft side of the opposition and is to pay a heavy price in the sequel to this play, *Man of Kafira.* However, the part played by Regina for furtherance of action in the play is in significant. Her role is limited to persuading Jusper to write a play and co-operate with Tumbo,

Boss, the ruler of the country, is another important character for whom politics is like acting. Also in his view, art has no purpose beyond the banal entertainment of his state visitor. He proudly declares to Mulili, that he is like fire that burns. In the words of Tumbo, Boss is not at all that bad at heart. His main problem is that he gets scared far too easily. That is why his advisors
are in fact ruling Kafira and the worst of them is Mulili. Exactly in conformity with this opinion of Tumbo, Boss is frightened with the mere words of Mulili about Kabito who is quoted as a bitter critic of Boss. He frantically becomes self-conscious about his own corrupt acts.

*Just how much does Kabito know about my private life?...That is no excuse, when a man plays with fire, he gets burned.* (p.p. 62 - 63)

He immediately commands Mulili, his cousin, *come report to me that he is silent.* (p.63)

This way Boss orders things to move according to his whims and fancies. Jusper’s old parents, Doga and Nina, are murdered before his release from prison. Because of his mindless administration, Kabitos, Tumbos, Mulilis and their likes have become native ruling class opening the flanks of African nations to mass exploitation by foreigners. Boss himself admits that he has hidden millions in foreign banks. Thus, Boss manages to create a perfect police state in Kafira. Boss in this way, represents exploitation, corruption and tyranny. He boasts of his abilities in a hyperbolic tone:

*They should have known my arms are long. My eyes see far, and my ears are the sharpest on the continent.* (p.70)

Here, we are reminded of king Ozymandias in P.B. Shelley’s “Ozymandias, when he boasts of his greatness:

*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:*

*Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!*⁵
Like Ozymandias whose own words serve, as a mockery of his statue in
ruins, Boss' arrest at the end of the play, also appears to mock at his vanity.

Thus, every event in Kafira takes place according to the orders of Boss. But it is surprising to know that, such an important character appears only twice in the last scene. Earlier in the play we hear about Boss only from the government official, Tumbo.

Though the characterisation is weak as none of the characters in the play is well developed, its strength lies in the effective presentation of betrayal at different levels in a country where there is no popular government. By ordering the killing of the innocent people like Adika for his mere participation in the student demonstration against the influx of expatriate personnel in to the country, being responsible for the mindless killing of the old parents of Jusper, Doga and Nina, as part of psychological war against him, by commanding Mulili to kill Kabito, the other government official and by keeping millions of public money in foreign banks, Boss, the ruler of Kafira has betrayed the people. Tombo corrupts the play-writing competition by pronouncing Jusper a winner without even actually organising it. Thus, Tumbo betrays the confidence of the rules of natural justice and fairness. The competition between Kabito and Mulili for the award of the milk tender

_is a manifestation of the jungle philosophy of the survival of the fittest._

6

The most blatant show of betrayal in Mulili's denunciation of his cousin, Boss, when the latter was overthrown.
Thus, every character in the government has betrayed the hope and trust that is invested in them by the people, and every other character outside the government has worked against such betrayal. This aspect of action of betrayal and reaction against the betrayal, makes the political theme strong, and in a way contributes to the tautly-knit structure of the play.

The technique of play within the play and the employment of madness of the characters as stylistic device for characterisation are the other advantages of the play.

The last seen of the play is presented as a play within the play. It is a rehearsal of the play to be staged by the prisoners for the pleasure of a certain visiting head of the state. It acquires significance in the play, because it is in the rehearsal Boss is taken a prisoner and the government is toppled. Thus, the technique of play within the play serves as the climax scene and turns to be a trap-play similar to that of Shakespeare in *Hamlet*.

*Madness* is one of the theatrical techniques employed by the playwright. The technique has powerfully served as a stylistic device for characterisation. Jusper is mad in the sense his speech lacks in logical progression of thought, but certainly fraught with reality. Jusper himself says:

people say I am mad.

.... *I know the difference between Sun, Jupiter and Jusper*. .... Jupiter I – Absent sir. Jusper I – present sir. Justice ! – absent sir. ... Jupiter and Justice are one and the same (pp. 10-11)
These words outwardly appear mad, but the reality is that Jusper mockingly draws a parallel between justice and Jupiter; both are distant and invisible to the naked eye. This only indicates that justice for the people is greatly compromised. So, it is proved beyond doubt that Jusper's madness is merely a label that Imbuga has created only to present the facts in the guise of madness.

The technique is also employed to educate the audience to what extent the national mismanagement can destroy its people. Thirdly, Jusper's madness can be taken as the reflection of the fury of his generation and the problems in his society. This idea is clearly expressed in Jere's words:

*When the madness of an entire nation disturbs a solitary mind, it is not enough, to say the man is mad.* (p. 35)

In this way, Imbuga's experimentation with *madness* as the technique is perfectly suited to express, complex ideas and situations in the play.

Being an African dramatist, Imbuga expresses traditional practices in his dramas. Tradition is expressed through the dialogue between Doga and Nina. Early in the morning they come to Adika's grave and found it defiled. In spite of this, Doga says that the ceremony must go on. The crack on the grave must be filled up at once. Doga says:

*The ceremony must go on as planned. I do not want the spirits of the dead would turn wild with anger.* (p.9)
After the death of Adika, the shaving ceremony is to be performed. A small bowl is kept on the grave in which money is placed. The tradition is that the soul of the dead will be appeased by placing silver coins. There is also a reference to the practice of circumcision to be performed on a boy by his father. In spite of the slow spread of modernism, traditions have not changed in African society.

The language used by different characters speaks at their own mentality. Doga, a native African, speaks with tradition in mind and the old words of his native language cannot be missed. He says *a mouse does not share a bowl with a cat.* (p.29) At the same time, *he thinks that a cloudy sky does not always cry rain.* (p.9) Jusper, on the other hand, is very emotional. He wants to take revenge for the death of his parents and his brother. He says, *How can I ever rest with the death of my entire family on my mind.* (p.30) He tells Regina that she has lost her fighting spirit like every one else in the street. On the other hand, Mosese is a dreamer who does not know how to bring about a revolution. Most of the time, his words are very soft. He speaks in a philosophic manner. He says:

*Our Kingdom had come at last. It was all an illusion. How many of us have set eyes upon that Kingdom? What colour is it?* (p.31)

The language of Mulili is according to his background – that of an uneducated rugged fellow. When Jere allows the ceremony to go on, Mulili shouts:

*....what you thinks you do? You shall pays for it.* (p.20)

About the tender awarded to him on the order from Boss, he says:
You knows who speaking? It is me, me Boss himself, no bloody vice deputy. (p.57)

Poisoning the mind of Boss against Kabito, he tells Boss, that one, he be a green grass in the snake. (p.62) The language reflects what kind of man Mulili is. The language of other characters is according to their role in the play.

Imbuga also employs parody very well in the play. The present situation in Kafira is a parody of Loss of Individual Freedoms in Africa. It does not help simply if a person is put in prison, because his mind cannot be changed. Boss and his aides think that all will be well if dissidents are put in prison. There is parody when Jere asks:

....has it ever occurred to you that the outside of this cell may well be the inside of another? (p.21)

It is not simply those who are physically in prison that are in bondage, but all freedom loving people of the nation. Jusper refers to birds chirping near his brother's grave. Atleast, they are free to exercise their prerogative to be heard. There is an ironic tinge, when Jusper's envy for the freedom enjoyed by birds is compared with the fact that Mosese has been imprisoned for his expression of speech. The loss of freedom in an independent nation results in an emptiness that is equated to the everlasting wait for the kingdom of God. Mosese says:

How many of us have set eyes upon that kingdom?

What colour is it? (p.31)

This way, parody used by the playwright, amply reflects the ongoing reality in many African states.
There is symbolism brought out in the play. The Kafiran society is divided into they and us. They are represented by Jere, Jusper, Mosese, Regina and the students. Us are the betrayers – Mulili, Boss, Tumbo and Kabito. National security is only a clitché to stifle any kind of criticism. Securicor being the name of an English security multinational conglomerate, the idea of neo-colonialism is expressed. Symbolism is also reflected in the chirping of birds as well as the dirty crumpled red shirt worn by Jusper. At the grave of Adika, as a bird sings, Jusper says:

I like that bird for its bravery, comes to the wrong place and does not even bother to keep quite about it (p.11)

Jusper’s crumpled red shirt reflects his revolutionary nature. Jusper’s throwing of Chagaga’s body in to the river symbolises silting up the river with the discarded evil, represented by the likes of Chagaga.

It is evident from the play that Imbuga, as a committed writer, has tried to drive the point home that the hard-earned independence by the African nations from colonial rule is culminated in neo-colonialism and dictatorship. Thus, the futility of independence and the devastating effects of one-man rule are powerfully dramatised to prove his point that dictatorship is a great hurdle in the way of all-round progress of these nations. Imbuga has mirrored the on-going reality of,

the continued economic exploitation of Africa’s total resources and of Africa’s labour power by international monopoly, capitalism through
continued creation and encouragement of subservient weak capitalistic economic structures, captained or overseered by a native ruling class.  

The playwright's feelings and aims are clearly reflected in the words of Jere:

*Our wish was not to swim in human blood, but to provide a mirror for Kafira. A mirror that will reflect the real faces of Kafiran front men....we must learn to sacrifice ourselves for a better future. A future where these events that now take place need not be repeated.* (p.76)

The other point which Imbuga emphasises in the play is that, if the rulers are strong, those like Tumbo and Mulili do not exist. This aim of the playwright is elucidated in explicit terms in his next play *The Successor.*
References:


