CHAPTER III

The Successor
The Successor can be said to be a story reflecting the disturbing aspects of political system in Africa. It is a story about political corruption and conspiracy for grabbing political power. The purpose of the play is to show how dangerous and self-stultifying the reign of monarchy is, and the need to switch over to democracy.

Emperor Chonda of Masero has the problem of succession, as he is not blessed with male children. In the existing political scenario, his advisors try to grab power, even as they pretend to be interested only in the future of the country.

The play is set to take place in the Masero, a semi modern African empire. The curtain opens with Zira, a young dancer, entering the remains of the Shrine of God of Peace;

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

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

Emperor should name his successor as soon as possible, otherwise the storm is inevitable. (p.11)
The action in Part one, scene two, takes place on a footpath near the Shrine of the God of Peace. Zira confronts Chief Sasia, the other Minister Adviser to the Emperor, exhorting him to marry her. She declares:

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

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

Like Satan in Milton’s Paradise Lost and Iago in Shakespeare’s Othello, Chief Oriomra, tempts Sasia for the seat of emperor,....you have a chance to become Emperor of Masero...Sasia, your name is on the people’s lips! (p.21)

As part of his masterplan, he sows the seeds of suspicion in the mind of Sasia about Zira, he inventing a lie that Zira is heavy with Jandi’s child. At this right point of time, he asks Sasia to persuade Zira to claim that she has been impregnated by Chief Jandi, the most favored name for the crown, so that they can silence the contender forever.

The remains of the Shrine continue to be the scene of action in Part one scene three. Emperor Chonda requests Dr. See Through to resolve the riddle of his strange dream in which his late father’s head visits him repeatedly. The Diviner advises the emperor to name his successor, so that his father’s head will go back where it belongs. (p.38)

In Part two scene one there is a trial scene shown as a flashback in which Zira lies that Jandi has made her pregnant. Emperor Chonda punishes
him with banishment for the crime. After this scene, the conversation between Zira and Sasia reveals that Jandi has committed suicide. Zira realises her mistake and arrives at the Shrine to confess her crime to the Diviner. But Sasia frantically argues against the confession;

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

As Zira continues to be unyielding, Sasia stabs her with a knife. Oriomra, who has been hiding and waiting for such an opportunity, shoots Sasia and makes an exit leaving both Sasia and Zira for dead.

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

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

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

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

Oriomra, in a bid to complete the cycle of his evil design, arrives at the palace and informs the emperor that Sasia has stabbed Zira to death and he himself committed suicide. With the entry of Jandi, the clearance of suspense is complete, and this paves the way for the Emperor grasping the meaning of
all the past events, and his announcement of Jandi as his successor.

Regarding Oriomra's arrest, Jandi says:

Emperor of the people of Masero, the punishment of an evil-doer is the people's choice. It cannot be left in the mouth of one man. (p.66)

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

Generally speaking, the play should provide theatre-goes with entertainment and its conclusion should offer some instructive advice, as well.

Thus, East African drama has acquired a role in the educational process.¹

The Successor turns into two parts. The theme of political conspiracy begins to develop in the first scene of Part one itself with Chief Oriomra urging the Diviner to advise the Emperor to name his successor as early as possible. In the next scene, Sasia is seen as power monger, as he shakes hands with cunning Chief Oriomra in hatching a plot to discord Chief Jandi. Thus, the action initiated by Oriomra in the first scene, is developed in the second scene. In the third scene, the dream mentioned in the first scene is described and the Diviner suggests that the Emperor should name his successor early. The most important aspect is the clever warning by the Diviner to the emperor regarding his conspirators:
As things happen on the lines of these statements in the climax, it has a bearing on the main action of the play.

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

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

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

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

Here one is reminded of Shakespeare's soothsayer warning Julius Ceaser, *Beware of Ides of March,*\(^2\) when Dr. See Through warns the Emperor Chonda.

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

The Physical action of Dr. See Through is limited and the remaining action is left to one's imagination.

There is only one prominent woman character, Zira. She represents an ordinary teenager who is physically exploited by the noble class. She plays a major role equivalent to that of the cunning politician, Oriomra. She is portrayed as a virtuous victim of the *Political ploy* by Chief Oriomra, as she is involved in a series of turbulent situations. She feels ashamed of her immoral activity with Sasia as she considers herself unfit even to see the face of the Diviner.

*Eye of the future
I kneel before your presence
And beseech you to permit me
To look you in the face I am down, Doctor* (p.1)
When Sasia deceives her for the second time with his evil design of making Jandi responsible for her pregnancy, she meekly responds favourably lest her future will be in peril. However, she realises her mistake and boldly decides, much against the wishes of her lover, Sasia, to confess her crime to the emperor, defying the threat of death from him:

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

She is a sharp contrast to all the remaining characters especially to Sasia. While she loves and scarifices everything for him, he recklessly impregnates and forces her to blame Jandi for her pregnancy, so that, it will be a cake walk for him to succeed the emperor. When Zira decides to speak out the truth, out of fear of banishment, unmindful of her love for him, Sasia stabs her. He is one character who is put to tremendous conflict in the third scene. However, he cannot forget her love for him and for their unborn child, but still wants to play the political game to become the successor. On the other hand, he is unable to bear the suspicion that Zira has illicit contacts with Jandi. Caught between fear of punishment and love for Zira, his mind becomes restless and is forced to stab her. Unable to face the truth, he finally decides to commit suicide. However, he is shot at by Oriomra.

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

Orimora's persuasive skill can be observed from the following conversation:

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

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

Jandi is the likely successor. One can know the reasons for his selection - selfless service to the empire and saving the Emperor’s only daughter, Rita, from drowning. All these heroic qualities of Jandi are heard from the other characters like the emperor and his wife, Kaliyesa. To substantiate these activities on the stage, Imbuga has not involved the character of Jandi in any notable action. In fact, the prospective emperor makes his brief appearance only twice, that too, in the flashback episode and in the end. He should have been the protagonist with much of the action attached to him, as the title itself refers to him. It is the irony that Imbuga has made the character a mere mouth-piece of the other characters.

Kaliyesa, the Emperor’s wife, says about Jandi:

He was a good, straightforward, brilliant Youngman....But, I still think you were too hasty in your decision to banish him. Had he lived, he would have made a good leader, even in exile.

Emperor Chonda himself agrees with his wife:

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

This quality of dull characterisation has perhaps prompted Martin Banham to comment on the plays of Imbuga:
One suspects that as may be true of Ngugi's plays, they (Imbuga's plays) read rather better than they act.

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

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

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

*The laws of the land is supreme over nature.* (p.54)

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

*Remember the emperor is no emperor without Sega, his old food taster. What if the Diviner comes while I am away and gives a root or some bitter leaf for medicine who will taste it before you? The big man is not big without the small man, you know.* (p.31)
Imbuga's technique of dream and his theory of double perspective of sub-conscious mind and conscious mind are brought out through the characters like Emperor Chonda.

Imbuga says:

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

Imbuga further clarifies the concept:

*It is the drama where actions of characters are influenced by deeply-rooted experience of their past, by deeply-rooted fears of - or rewards for - past actions.*

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

Francis Imbuga has never wasted a word or introduced a superfluous incident in the drama. His language is unambiguous and more refined. It is simple, lucid and precise. He is simple in that he writes prose which is easy to read and understand except occasional use of native language without giving their English equivalents.
For instance, the female voices singing from the *Shrine of the God of Peace* in the opening scene is of this nature.

\[
\text{Ndiegu akazia Kusumaa} \\
\text{.........................} \\
\text{.........................} \\
\text{.........................} \\
\text{Zunu I, Zunu I....Zunu I.....Zunu I} \text{ (p.1)}
\]

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

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

\[
\text{No, I will not accept to lie to anyone, let alone the Emperor and ruler of this land. I do not earn my living by telling lies. (p.6)}
\]

Imbuga's plays are known for irony, humour and symbolism. The treatment of the theme of political conspiracy in *The Successor* is fraught with irony.

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

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

Irony is at its peak when Imbuga harmoniously blends it with humour. The Ironical humour is well presented through the character of Segasega, the old jester and food taster.

*Behind the humour, of course, lies the cunning and satirical attack on corruption, abuse of power, hypocrisy and affectation.*

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

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

**Segasega:** you are wrong, my lord. Two big ones can't call each other big, but a small man will call a big man big. Big because the small man has made the big man big.

The big man is made of the small man,
but the small man is made of not the
big man, but smaller man. (p.32)

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

The element of humour is yet another strong point in the play. Imbuga can produce humorous dialogue for serious characters too. They are so powerful that one cannot remain without laughing. When Sasia says that Jandi has dived into the roaring river and has saved Emperor Chonda’s daughter, Rita, from drowning, Oriomra replies.

Then it is a ‘Divers’s Medal, he deserves not the Crown. (p.25)

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Contrasts* is the other technique through which Imbuga presents his theme of political conspiracy. Contrast can be seen in the two opposite themes of the play. The play begins and runs with the theme of political aspects of monarchy. It contrasts with the thematic dialogue of Jandi and Segasega about democracy in the end. *Diviner Sees Through*, the bringer of peace, is a sharp contrast to the remaining characters, who create unrest. Jandi, with no ambition for power, contrasts with Sasia, Zira and Oriomra, who have thirst for power. Zandi, an ordinary teenage dancer, with an important role, is again a sharp contrast to the other unimportant woman character, Kaliyesa, the wife of the Emperor.
Imbuga is not a revolutionary like Wole Soyinka and Ngugi who are straightforward in condemning the evils of their societies with their cruel characters being subjected to the cruel punishments like death on the stage.

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

A close study of the play reflects the playwright's views on the contemporary political system in Africa. He has exposed the inherent weaknesses of one-man rule in the play through the character of Emperor Chonda. He has projected the emperor as superstitious, fickle-minded and inefficient, only to expose the disastrous result of the rule of monarchy and to allow the kingdom to embrace democracy. This message of the playwright is heard as the following characters sum up the play:

*Jandi:*  
*Emperor of the people of Masero,*  
*the punishment of an evil doer is the people's choice. It cannot be left in the mouth of one man.*

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

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


5. Ahmad Harb, p. 580

6. Ibid., p. 581