



## Power Struggle in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja*

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### Abstract

A major cause of crises in various strata of the human society is power struggle in different layers. Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja* exemplify historical African plays which have been copiously previously studied. However, most of the existing studies on these plays have failed to address the issue of power struggles in these plays, despite the fact that power struggle is central to the plays, and is a cardinal issue which is of urgent currency in African continent and different parts of the globe. Power struggle has put a cog in the wheel of progress of many a country across the globe. This study is an enterprise at filling this gap. It examines the various instances of power struggles in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, and Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja*. Foucault's Discourse Analysis provides the theoretical framework of the study. In the two plays examined, there is power struggle among several characters. In *Kurunmi*, there is power struggle between *Kurunmi* and *Adelu*, *Kurunmi* and the *Ibadan chiefs*, *Ogunmola* and *Ibikunle*, and *Ibadan* and *Ijaye*. In *The Trials of Afonja*, *Afonja* and *Alaafin Aole*, *Afonja* and the *Oyo warriors*, and *Afonja* and *Alimi* are locked in power struggles. In addition, figures in authority habitually use language to express their dominance and request obedience from those subordinate to them. The paper submits that Ola Rotimi and Toyin Abiodun employ power struggles among several characters not only to propel the plots of their plays but also to foreground the historical and socio-cultural backgrounds of the plays.

**Key words:** Power struggle; Historical African Drama; Foucault's Discourse Analysis

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### INTRODUCTION

History remains a consistent and perennially useful material for playwrights of all generations. Many playwrights across the globe have leaned back on history in their plays. The incredibly high corpus of historical plays across the globe lends credence to the veracity of this claim. The end product of the interplay between the dramatist and history is history plays. Ademola Dasylyva (1997:24) defines history plays as "attempts at creative documentation of actual events of communal (or national) significance and interest through enactments." An inference that can be drawn from Dasylyva's definition of history plays is that dramatists typically focus on momentous historical events. Examples of American historical drama and European historical plays include Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), Bertolt Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* (1940), Rolf Hochhuth's *Soldiers* (1968), and Robert Bolt's *A Man For All Seasons* (1960). In African drama, historical plays abound. Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru* (1999), Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988), and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* (1970), and Martin Owusu's *The Mightier Sword* (1973) are examples. The focus of this study is on two African historical plays: Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja*.

Drama, like other genres of literature, is a product of social life and must address issues affecting the human society. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981:6) holds that "drama cannot elect to stand alone or transcend economics, politics, class and race." Literature does not grow out of

a vacuum; it is given impetus and direction by society. Drama cannot be divorced from politics, political happenings of its time, and the salient issues affecting the dramatists' societies. With a particular reference to Africa, power struggle exemplifies these principal issues. Since the attainment of independence, many African countries have grappled with the problem of power conflict between the rulers on the one hand, and between the rulers and the ruled on the other hand.

Studies abound on Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja*. Brian Crow (1983) compares the character of Oba Ovonramwen in Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* with *Kurunmi* in Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. He argues that these two kings are embodiments of rich African traditions. According to him:

Like *Kurunmi*, in another of the dramatist's "historical tragedies", Ovonramwen is both the advocate and the embodiment of "tradition". The "richness" of the Oba's character, like that of the Yoruba General's, cannot be separated from the "richness" of the tradition of which he is the bearer (24).

Chris Dunton (1992) posits that *Kurunmi*, like Rotimi's earlier play, *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, provides proof of the playwright's masterly handling of stagecraft. Egwugwu Ilah (2001) critically examines the various cultural elements in Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. He discusses how cultural politics informs the stylization of historical material or historical reconstruction in *Kurunmi*. Femi Shaka (2001) explores the historical backgrounds of Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, *Hopes of the Living Dead* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. According to him, "Rotimi is one African playwright who has consistently shown fidelity to historical materials in his dramaturgy." He submits that the plays bear the hallmarks of African historical drama. Akintunde Akinyemi (2010) in his study on the reenactment of the nineteenth century Yoruba Ijaye War in African dramaturgy employs Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Wale Ogunyemi's *Ijaye* as case studies. Writes Akintunde Akinyemi (2010, p.43):

...what we have in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Ogunyemi's *Ijaye* are adaptations/dramatic recreations of the Yoruba history during the internecine struggles and power politics of the second half of the nineteenth century which culminated in the Ijaye war of the 1860s.

He describes the two playwrights as "two of the closest Nigerian dramatists in English to the Yoruba traditional performing arts both in terms of the use of oral tradition and history." Tunji Azeez (2012) categorises *Kurunmi* as a war drama and not as a historical drama, as studies such as Olu Obafemi (1996), Femi Shaka (2001), Ebewo (2005) and Adeniyi (2007) have categorised the play.

In her paper on Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja*, Susan Badeji (2013) discusses the role of the supernatural elements/forces in the play. The supernatural forces, led by Yeye Eleye, contribute immeasurably towards Afonja twenty-nine successive victories at the battle field. Nelson

Fashina (2012) in his introduction to the play hints on the points of convergence and divergence between Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja* and the historical background of the play. Part of the cause of the rupturing of history in the play is the role of the witches who introduce supernatural elements to the play. Fashina (2012) suggests an ironic title of the play as: "The Trials of History." Abiodun Olayiwola (2012) describes *The Trials of Afonja* as:

An artistic reincarnation of an ancient tale which captures the intriguing travails of a war generalissimo of old Oyo Empire: A well-hewn play with plausible characters that are steeped in Yoruba culture and history. It invokes the influence of history on the general well-being of contemporary society.

Henry Hunjo (2012) opines that *The Trials of Afonja* is:

A fine piece of drama, textually crafted to meet high standards of linguistic felicity and stage performance competence. In this play, Toyin Abiodun deploys his understanding of the dialectics of traditional Yoruba politics, diplomacy and warfare to enact a historic past on stage; and to arouse the audience to embrace humanism in all spheres of governance and war.

Remarkably, few of the previous studies on these plays have examined the issue of power struggle in the plays, despite its centrality to the plays and its great relevance to contemporary African discourse. This study fills this gap in literary scholarship. It examines the various instances of power struggles in the play. Foucault's Discourse Analysis provides the theoretical framework. Foucault's Discourse Analysis stresses power relations as expressed through language and power. It is based on the theories of the celebrated French philosopher and postmodernist, Michel Foucault. (M. H. Abrams, 2005, p.218). Foucault argues that power is not merely a physical force, but a pervasive human dynamic determining our relationships to others. Power is not exclusively class-related; it extends throughout the society. Foucault's Discourse Analysis may, for example, examine how figures in authority use language to express their dominance, and request from those subordinate to them (Michel Foucault, 1972). Power relations and power struggles are central to Foucault's Discourse Analysis. Foucault (2000) avers that power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus. The import of Foucault's statement is that power relations are endemic in human society. We are so immersed in them that we tend to take them for granted. Power relations can be between a husband and a wife, a gynaecologist and a patient, a lawyer and a client, an anthropologist and a local community, a lecturer and a student, a Chief Executive Officer of a company and his employees, etc.

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## 1. POWER STRUGGLE IN OLA ROTIMI'S *KURUNMI*

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*Kurunmi* is a historical tragedy on the nineteenth century crisis in Oyo empire in Nigeria (Ajayi & Smith, 1971). The play is based on the Ijaye War of 1860, a war which

was triggered by a concatenation of events. According to historical account, in 1858, the Alafin of Oyo, Alafin Atiba, sensing that he was about to die, broke tradition and made his heir, Adelu, the Alafin. Prior to this, the tradition required the heir apparent to commit suicide on the death of his father, Kurunmi, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo. The historical background to this tradition, a policy to curtail the excesses of some overzealous Crown Princes who usually assert power and authority with impunity is found in Samuel Johnson's highly influential work, *The History of the Yorubas*. Kurunmi vehemently opposed Alafin Atiba's relegation of tradition, insisting that Prince Adelu should commit suicide and be buried with his father as the tradition demanded. When Kurunmi could not stop the installation of Adelu as Alafin, he decided to attack Oyo and reinstate the decadent tradition. He had the support of the Egba people, while Alafin Adelu enjoyed overwhelming support from the Ibadan people.

The deep-seated rivalry and the power struggle between Ibadan and Ijaye, the two mainstays of Oyo largely influenced their decisions. The outcome of their respective stance is the source of drama of *Kurunmi*, a play in which Rotimi's dexterity in the exploration of historical materials plumbed new depths. *Kurunmi* has deservedly enjoyed critical acclaim and commercial success since its publication. The play centres on the power struggle between Kurunmi, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo of Ijaye, the unflinching supporter of tradition, and Ibadan chiefs led by Balogun Ibikunle. The Egba support the Ijaye. In defence of tradition, Kurunmi drags his people into a ruinous war. In the war, the Egba advise and mount pressure on the Ijaye to take the risky venture of crossing River Ose to attack Ibadan and her allies. His alliance with the Egba proves disastrous, culminating in the defeat of the Ijaye people in the hands of Ibadan. The Ijaye record heavy casualties in the war. Kurunmi loses five sons, Arawole, Sangodele, Fatoki, Ogunlade, and Efunlabi in the war. The death of his five sons marks the climax of Kurunmi's cataclysmic fall. He becomes grief-stricken, and devastated by the monumental tragedies that befall him. He says:

When a leader of men has led his people to disaster, and what remains of his present life is but a shadow of his proud past, then it is time to be leader no more (*Kurunmi*, 93).

Divested of all hopes, grief-stricken, Kurunmi drinks poison from a calabash bowl, and states his final wish to be buried in River Ose.

Matthew Umukoro (2011, p.175) makes an incisive comment on Kurunmi's final moments on earth that "Kurunmi reportedly pined away in grief and hunger, repeatedly asking himself whether he was wrong in the war. He finally died in June, 1861." Interestingly, the war outlived Kurunmi. Despite the destruction of his new base by the Ibadan as early as March 1862, the war raged on till 1865 when it officially ended (Samuel Johnson, 1921).

Several actions and events in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* depict the historical and socio-cultural background of the play. Kurunmi's uncompromising stance on the sustenance of the dictates of the tradition is captured in the opening scene of the play:

My people, I greet you today the feast of Ororun...my sons here and I, we have just come back from a meeting with Alafin Atiba in Oyo...We were all seated. Oba Atiba come down from his high throne. In his right hand, the sword of Ogun; in his left hand, the bolt of Sango. He came towards us: "Swear, My people," said he, "swear to Ogun and to my forebear, Sango, that my son, Adelu, will be king after me..." (17).

Ogun and Sango are among the prominent gods worshipped in Yoruba land. Ogun is the god of iron, while Sango is the god of thunder. Kurunmi's aforementioned speech illuminates the great power bestowed on these gods by the Yoruba people.

Power struggle, a primary focus of Foucault's Discourse Analysis, runs through the play. There is historical background to this. In the magisterial work, *Yoruba Warlords of the Nineteenth Century*, Toyin Falola and G.O. Oguntomisin (2001) argue that Kurunmi's objection to Adelu's succession was not only based on Kurunmi's desire to ensure that Oyo succession rule was religiously obeyed, but also as a result of the deep-seated enmity between him and Atiba. They claim that reality probably dawned on Kurunmi that Adelu, Atiba's favourite son, was likely to revive the Alafin's control over Upper Ogun towns. In view of this, Kurunmi refused to recognise Adelu as the new Alafin, and did not pay the traditional homage to him. Instead, he was reportedly seeking another candidate of the older line from the royal families of the refugee towns of Saki, Ighoho, and Kisi. The tragic conflict in Rotimi's dramatic adaptation of Ijaye War resides in the character of Are Kurunmi whose fortunes in relation to his society and the cosmic environment inform Rotimi's tragic vision.

Olu Obafemi (1996, p.99) posits that Kurunmi's supreme belief in his own powers, based on his military astuteness is the main germ of his tragedy. The well-documented power struggle between Kurunmi and Atiba is evident in the play. Kurunmi's language drips with sarcasm as he reports his encounter with Atiba to the people of Oyo during the feast of Ororun:

'Clown,' I yelled, 'out of my cursed sight!' {spits.} 'I shall be no party to perversion and disgrace.' I picked up my staff and walked out (17).

Failure to manage this power struggle degenerates into the pogrom. There is also a power struggle between Kurunmi and Alafin Adelu, who feels insulted by Kurunmi's insolence and disregard for his authority.

Another major instance of power struggle in the play is that between Kurunmi and Ogunmola, the 2<sup>nd</sup> in command to the Ibadan War General, Balogun Ibikunle. This foregrounds the rivalry between the two mainstays of the

new Oyo; that is, Ibadan and Ijaye. Ogunmola recounts his harrowing experience with Kurunmi:

It was my wife I went to get from his bosom in Ijaiye when he caught me and tied me to a post in his back yard...For fourteen whole days Kurunmi kept me prisoner, and fed me on white ashes in his backyard, tied to a post (46).

Pa Layiwola Adio (2013) sheds more light on this incident in a revealing interview with *The Nation* newspaper:

Kurunmi captured Ogunmola alive and he was brought to Ijaiye where he was chained and was fed with ashes in the palace... The story continued that in the night one of Aare Kurunmi's wives betrayed him as she secretly went to unfetter Bashorun Ogunmola and assisted him to escape.

The feeding of Ogunmola with ashes was to kill him.

Power struggle is also evident in the encounter between Kurunmi and five notable Ijaye warriors: Epo, Fanyaka, Akiola, Asegbe and Amodu. As the conflict of the play builds up, they barge in on him, and remonstrate with him for his overbearing attitude and dictatorial leadership:

EPO: What is all this about going to war?  
AKIOLA: You did not consult with the people.  
FANYAKA: When a man has placed himself far above his people, he is ready to gamble with their lives.  
ASEGBE: You talk so much about breakers of tradition.  
AMODU: You have grown too powerful, my lord.  
FANYAKA: It is better to be loved than feared.  
EPO: Answer my question, Great One.  
KURUNMI: Do you dare...  
AKIOLA: You will not bully us, Old One.  
FANYAKA: Answer the question (37).

The protest continues:

WARRIORS: Kurunmi, Kurunmi, Kurunmi! Abah!  
AMODU: Your power chokes us, my lord (39-40).

The five armed warriors subvert the traditional opinion that a generalissimo of the army must not be queried over his actions. They emanate a great deal of confidence as they challenge him over his superciliousness, and overbearing attitude towards his subjects. Their subversion is contained in the text as Kurunmi effectively handles them, and regain their trust. Amodu, one of the warriors, reassures Kurunmi:

From this day on, as before, it is Are Kurunmi I will serve, it is Are Kurunmi I will die for (42).

Perhaps the most pronounced power struggle in the play is that between the Ibadan War General, Balogun Ibikunle and his 2<sup>nd</sup> in command, Bashorun Ogunmola. They have different attitudes towards the idea of Ibadan waging a war with the Ijaiye. Ibikunle is demonstrably wary of going into war with the Ijaiye due to the consanguinity between them. Ibikunle says:

Caution, my brothers. Ijaiye and Oyo and Ibadan, my brothers, are one. A man cannot be so angry with his own head that he

seizes the cap from that head and dons his buttocks with it (46).

Conversely, Ogunmola is pugnacious, and insists on going to war. Two principal reasons largely inform Ogunmola's stance. One, he has an axe to grind with Kurunmi. The war, he strongly feels, would give him the great opportunity to revenge the untold hardship and embarrassment he earlier suffers in Kurunmi's hands. Secondly, he is overly contemptuous of the much older Ibikunle whom he feels is spent. He calls Ibikunle a coward in the presence of the warriors and other Ibadan chiefs. Mortified, Ibikunle states:

Battles...I have seen many, my brothers. Ogunmola calls me a coward!...Ogunmola calls me a coward? (50).

Ibikunle and Ogunmola extend their power struggle to the Ibadan camp of the war front. Wielding a spear, Ibikunle intimidates Ogunmola who finds the encounter unnerving.

Power relations are amply demonstrated in *Kurunmi*. The Ijaiye people hold Are Kurunmi in high esteem. The Ijaiye crowd always prostrate themselves in deference to him whenever they come to the palace. The warriors always prostrate themselves or kneel down when addressing him. The Oyo messengers, Kutenlo and Obagbori prostrate themselves in greeting when they meet Kurunmi. They even wait for him to ask them to rise up before doing so. On several occasions, the Ijaiye people always end their speeches with: "my lord" when addressing Kurunmi, an enigmatic character. These are indices of the power relations between Kurunmi and his subjects.

The visit of Timi Ede and Bashorun Oluyole to Kurunmi is another instance of power relations. Timi Ede and Bashorun Oluyole's costumes are emblematic of their royalty. Their speeches reflect the socio-cultural and historical contexts of the power they wield. As nobles, they expect the Ijaiye crowd to prostrate themselves as the custom demands:

Awu...Kurunmi, have we fallen so low in the eyes of your subjects that even slaves among them now feel too noble to prostrate themselves in respect for our presence? (18)

Kurunmi retorts:

I will have no one call my slaves, slaves. There are no slaves in Ijaiye. every man, every woman, every child in Ijaiye is Kurunmi's child (18).

Rotimi's *Kurunmi* has been a successful play both in text and in performance. Chris Dunton (1992:18) gives an account of the play's remarkable success:

*Kurunmi* has been a successful play with audiences, and critical coverage of early performances was especially enthusiastic. The enshrinement of the play as a study-text is evident in the fact that, ten years after its premiere, it had already appeared on the NCE (National Certificate of Education) literature syllabus, the literature syllabus for the IJMB (International Joint Matriculation Board) exam and the Teachers' Grade 11 English

syllabus for the Northern States. Rotimi's skills were given very early recognition by the Nigerian literary establishment.

The success of this play can be attributed partly to the themes of leadership and power struggle explored by the playwright. These are issues of urgent currency in Nigeria, where the plays are set, and many African countries.

## 2. POWER STRUGGLE IN TOYIN ABIODUN'S *THE TRIALS OF AFONJA*

Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja* interrogates the question of leadership, and even followership. Leadership is Abiodun's major thematic preoccupation in the play. Embedded in this theme is the issue of power struggle, which permeates the fabric, and propels the plot of the play.

One strand of the exploration of this theme is the clash of interest between the leaders and the led. This clash of interest is demonstrated between Afonja and his warriors in Bambaras, culminating in their avoidable defeat. Having subdued the Bambaras, Afonja warns the Oyo war generals and the Esos of Oyo to wait until they return home before sharing the spoils of war, in order to avoid any form of distraction. The Oyo war generals and the Esos of Oyo protest vehemently, and express an opinion they have repressed over the years concerning the seemingly unjust sharing formula:

OTUN BALOGUN *{laughs}* He wants us to carry the spoils of war home first. He us wants to carry the spoils of war home first. He wants to carry the spoils of war to Oyo. There, the Alaafin will take half. Bashorun, as Head of the Oyomesi, will take half of what is left; then the rest of us, the rest of us who lay down our lives for the sake of the empire, who left our wives and children in Oyo to come and die in here on the battlefields; what do we get?...crumbs!...*{he spits in disgust}* Never!  
EKERIN I say we divide the spoils here and now.  
AKILAPA And I say yes, I say yes; yes, or many of us must die fighting amongst ourselves today. *{AKILAPA draws his sword and all other generals do same in his support.}* (24).

The altercation over the sharing of the spoils of the war is a pointer to the power struggle which runs through the play. The deep-seated power struggle between Afonja and the Oyo war generals, particularly Akilapa, is evident in the manners the war generals address Afonja. When Afonja insists they must wait till they return to Oyo before sharing the spoils, Akilapa addresses him disrespectfully:

Hear him! Hear him! Because your mother had royal blood, you were made Aare-Ona-Kakanfo over the rest of us Oyo's generals, now you come here to Lord it over us. You dish out commands as if we were your children (24).

Akilapa continues in the same vein not long after:

Yes...The mother of Aare-Ona-Kakanfo be cursed! You are not the only one Who deserves to be Aare-Ona-Kakanfo. Your mother be cursed! *{he spits on the ground}* (26).

Even when Afonja gives a strong warning to the

Oyo war generals not to touch the Bambara women that have been given to them as part of their spoils of war, Akilapa protests: "Who gave you that kind of power over us?" (30). Without mincing words, the war with the Bambaras gives Akilapa and, to a lesser extent, the other Oyo war generals the opportunity to express their disaffection with Afonja as the generalissimo of the Oyo army. Afonja demonstrates that he is far more powerful than them by fighting Akilapa, Otun Balogun and Ekerin simultaneously. He kills Ekerin and Otun Balogun, and inflicts wound on Akilapa, who throws in the towel.

Other instances of power struggle abound in Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja*. The power struggle between Afonja and Alaafin propels the plot of the play. When Afonja returns home alive after losing a battle to the Bambaras, Alaafin asks him to open the calabash and commit suicide in consonance with the dictates of the custom and tradition. Afonja stoutly refuses to open the calabash and commit suicide. The heated dialogue between them showcases the deep-seated power struggle between these two lead characters in the play:

ALAAFIN...Do the honourable thing. Don't force me to do it for you!  
AFONJA Do it for me! ...How will Kabiyesi achieve that?  
ALAAFIN I only have to summon my guard!  
AFONJA *{laughs}* Your guards! Kabiyesi...Your guards! I have an army covering all the gates of this palace. Gbogun and his men of war are just outside your doors. Are you need only play a certain tune on his flute and this palace...this palace will become a river of blood and come to ruin!  
ALAAFIN *{stunned}* You! You dare threaten your king so?...You...you dare threaten me?...I Alaafin...Alaafin Oyo!...*{he places the calabash in his hand on the floor of his palace and raises his flywhisk}* Afonja, son of Alagbin-born of Pasin, son of Laderin-Oyo rejects you! My ancestors Reject you! I reject you! The gods of my fathers reject you! *{he raises a foot and with it smashes the calabash into pieces}*  
AFONJA *{groans}* Haaa!...Haa!...Ha!...Aole (36).

The power struggle between Alaafin Aole and Afonja degenerates to an acrimonious level. In a desperate bid to defend his life and Ilorin, Afonja enlists the support of the nomadic Fulani herdsmen led by Alimi, an Islamic cleric. With their assistance, he is able to ward off all oppositions, schemes and ploys of the Alaafin. In the process of this power struggle, Afonja's subversive proclivity is foregrounded. His refusal to commit suicide as the custom demands is a subversion of an established order. He challenges the status quo and subverts the unwritten constitution. A good number of the actions he takes after this are also unmistakably subversive. Intriguingly, it is the same Alimi and the Fulanis who assist him in conquering Alaafin Aole who also kill him at the climax of the play:

*{Afonja lays down his sword and pulls off his war cap. He takes another look at DEMOKE, agonizes, and cups his head in his hands. While he still maintains that posture, Re-enter more FULANIS with AL HASSAN and MUSA. Suddenly, they surround AFONJA and begin to shower him with arrows and throw*

*Spears at him. He attempts unsuccessfully to wear his cap and also pick his sword during the attack...AFONJA dies with his cap still held in his hand.*} (121).

Afonja and Alimi are also locked in a power struggle at the climax of the play. Upon the demise of Alaaafin, Afonja refuses to wear Alaaafin's crown, much to Alimi's consternation. Alimi feels disturbed when Afonja announces that Afonja's future is in Ilorin. He feels threatened and promptly orchestrates Afonja's elimination. His statement after the confirmation of Afonja's death is striking:

I thought he will rule here and leave Ilorin for me. I can't stay here. I don't understand all these people of Oyo who speak in roundabout ways. I take over his palace in Ilorin where I understand them; and my own blood, starting from Abdulsalim, will rule Ilorin from generation to generation (122).

The power struggle between Afonja and Alimi ends in the latter's favour.

Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja* illustrates the diffusive nature of power; that is, how power is not exclusively class-related, extending throughout the human society. This is evident in the Oyomesi, the major ruling council of the Oyo Empire. It is constituted by seven chiefs: Bashorun (Prime Minister), Agbakin, Ashipa, Laguna, Akiniku, Samu, and Alapini. Each of them has defined roles within the day-to-day running of the Empire. The Oyomesi ooze considerable power. They are conscious of the quantum of power reposed in their individual positions. Little wonder, they express their utter shock and dismay when Afonja does not exempt them from his order that the people of Oyo should leave the palace so that he can have a private discussion with the Alaaafin, following his controversial return from the battle with the Bambaras. Alaaafin could not belie his shock at this preposterous request:

You mean even Bashorun, the Prime Minister of Oyo, should excuse you before you speak with me? (19).

Bashorun does not mince words in his response to Alaaafin's request:

Heard what?...Who is he?...What does he think he is to insist that the lot of us, the lot of us who together make the head and heart of Oyo should leave because he wants to speak with the king? What does he have to say that will not be brought before us? Are we not the royal council? Are we not the Oyomesi? (19).

Bashorun's statement not only depicts how people in the position of authority use language, but also a type of the power relations in the society. When Afonja loses his battle to the Bambaras after twenty-nine consecutive victories, he approaches the six witches led by Iya Mode (Yeye Eleye) who have been responsible for his phenomenal success. Yeye Eleye, the head of the witches states bluntly that Afonja's avoidable loss to the Bambaras is orchestrated by her. She is incensed by Afonja's contemptuous treatment of her in Alaaafin's palace. Her use of language demonstrates how the dominant group exerts power over others, and how power permeates every

fabric of the human society:

IYA MODE {YEYE ELEYE} You indulge him! You indulge Afonja! We see him to battles and bring him home unhurt...but what does he do? He chases me away like I'm some disgusting leprous woman. Before Bambaras, we gave him twenty-nine victories...But instead of being grateful, you drove me from the palace like a she-goat that had come to eat a tuber of yam at the back of your yard (50).

This is a clear indication of the power relations between the characters in the dramatic text. Afonja, who commands a whole army at war fronts, is now at the mercy of the witches, on the brink of tears. He pleads: "Iya Mode...I mean...Yeye Eleye, please have mercy on me." (52).

According to Foucault's discourse theory, power is not necessarily bad, or negative, since it can be put into productive use. The invaluable assistance the witches have rendered to Afonja over the years illuminates a productive use of power. Their supernatural power has been employed to bestow the aura of invincibility on Afonja. The role of the Bambara women in the defeat of the Oyo army in the battle with the Bambaras is another major instance of the productive use of power in *The Trials of Afonja*. The Bambaras snatch victory on the jaws of defeat in the hands of the Afonja-led Oyo army, thanks to the wiles of the Bambara women who have been shared as spoils of the war with the Oyo generals. Failing to heed Afonja's warning, the Oyo generals engage in sexual intercourse with the Bambara women, an act which culminates in their avoidable defeat.

Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja* emphasises on the disempowered and the marginalised in the society, who are suppressed and subjugated by power. The flogging of Jankalawa to death, and the beheading of the innocent Lasia are heights of oppression in the wielding of power. The female characters in the play are mostly marginalised, and portrayed as the instruments of pleasure in the hands of men. Alaaafin, for instance, makes a derogatory remark on his wives to Owota Lafianu:

Owota Lafianu, don't mind these ones. They are nothing but rough flowers from Dahomey. They need better tending {to the two wives}. Go! Go! Go!...both of you. Get out of here! (55).

In a similar vein, Alaaafin's daughter and Afonja's wife, Demoke is portrayed as being inordinately jealous, for walking out of her marriage to Afonja, following the latter's marriage of a second wife, Halima.

In *The Trials of Afonja*, figures of authority habitually use language to express their dominance and request obedience from those subordinate to them. In accordance with the custom and tradition, Alaaafin, as a king in Yorubaland, speaks in peremptory tone most of the time. When Afonja's praise singer, Arere plays his flute in Alaaafin's palace, Alaaafin commands him to discontinue the playing: "Enough! Enough of that cursed fluting in my palace!" (33). Alaaafin also employs peremptory tone when cursing Afonja:

Oyo rejects you! My ancestors reject you! I reject you! The gods of my fathers reject you! {he raises a foot and with it smashes the calabash into pieces} (36).

It is the same insistent tone which his position demands that he used to order Afonja to attack Apomu and Iwere, despite the grave consequences of such actions. He informs the Oyomesi: "We send him to attack and sack Apomu!"(39). With deadened nerves, without batting of eyelids, he orders the beheading of Lasia for bringing the covered calabash which contains Baale Apomu's head: "Take this one and behead him!" (77). He always demands obedience from his subjects, with immediate effect and alacrity.

The protagonist of the play, Afonja is a past master of the use of peremptory tone when addressing other characters. When he wants to have a private discussion with the Bambaras, he dismisses the celebration of the people peremptorily: "O to o o o! Enough!...I say enough!" (16).He charges at the drummers to enforce his order:

I say it is enough. {AFONJA removes a drummer's cap and uses it to beat the drummers.} (16).

In Apomu, he directs his head slave, Lasia thus:

Go into Apomu. Tell Apomu himself that Afonja waits at this entrance to his land. Tell him I will speak with him at once (72).

When one of his men of war, Fagbohun wants to express an opinion on the impending war with Apomu, Afonja shuts him up: "I do not ask you!" (72). In another instance, at the climactic scene of the play, he commands Arere: "Give me the calabash." (117).

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## CONCLUSION

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Whenever literary texts explore issues whose relevance transcends their locales, there is a compelling need to discuss how such issues are evident in the texts. Power struggle is so pronounced in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja* that the exploration of the theme in these plays merits a closer scrutiny. This is what this study has done. Without mincing words, Rotimi and Abiodun employ power struggles among several characters not only to propel the plots of their plays but also to foreground the historical and socio-cultural backgrounds of the plays.

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