

## Struggle for Social Justice: A Study of The Novels of Wole Soyinka

<sup>1</sup>Gita Devi and <sup>2</sup>Dr. Ashok Kumar

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Singhania University, Rajasthan

<sup>2</sup>Supervisor, Department of English, Govt. College, Satnali, M.Garh

### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Published Online: 20 February 2019

#### Keywords

Novel, Social Justice, Inspirational

### ABSTRACT

Wole Soyinka is known primarily as a playwright. His vision is described variously as, "inspirational", "transcendental", and "demanding but rewarding". He is also a poet and a literary critic as well as a novelist. *Season of Anomy* (1973) is only his second novel; his first, *The Interpreters* (1965), examines the lives of intellectuals in Nigeria immediately after independence. The novel is confounded with expectations and betrayals both because it is so far the only other novel "proper" that Soyinka has written and more importantly compared with *The Interpreters* (1965), his second novel which was a huge disappointment, so much so that for many critics, it seriously undermined the Nigerian dramatist's stature as a novelist. (Palmer 1979) Their newly acquired independence causes them in a state of aimlessness, still unsure of themselves and their roles in the new society but on the verge of commitment. *Season of Anomy* (1973) and *The Man Died* (1972) are the two prose works in Soyinka's tetralogy on the Nigerian Civil war which creates set of characters who take a commitment to transform society. Similarly the other two titles in this quartet are the volume of poems collected in the *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1971) and *Madmen and Specialists* (1970), the greatest allegorical drama.

### Introduction

Soyinka's character no doubt reflects his own struggle for social justice, for which he was imprisoned during the Biafra War, from 1967 to 1969. Violence became a fact of life for him. As he records in the journal of his prison experience, *The Man Died* (1972), he went through the kind of initiation that he attributes to Ofeyi in *Season of Anomy* (1973). The roots of African Humanism in the form of aspiration and betrayals can be found in Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973). The texture of the novel can be classified as a social commentary by which any reader can identify its basic principles of betrayals juxtaposed with the variety of concepts and observations. The setting of his novel is an African country which is a social realism.

In the novel *Season of Anomy* (1973) Aiyeru, a coastal African "farming and fishing community" whose main money making industry is boat building, is isolated from the rest of the country by lagoons and is approachable only by boat. It has kept its traditional ways, while most of the country, notably the modern city of Ilosa, is yielded to foreign influences. It has only recently come to the attention of the public as a curiosity for tourists and sociologists. The National Cocoa Corporation sees it as a new region to be exploited and sent its promotions group, headed by Ofeyi, the protagonist, to prepare the way. The meeting of Ofeyi and Aiyeru, however, is to have far different consequences. Uncomfortable in a Westernized Africa and dissatisfied with his role as a jingle-maker for the Corporation, Ofeyi brings to Aiyeru subversive ideas about farming and later, revolutionary ideas for transforming the entire society, ideas that, Ofeyi is surprised to learn, are fundamental to Aiyeru's way of life. Ofeyi complains to Ahime, the chief minister, that Aiyeru neglects its social responsibility; it must pursue a more aggressive role in counteracting the alien influences that are corrupting the country. It is only Ofeyi's naiveté and ignorance that prevents him from

recognizing that Ahime is far ahead of him in understanding his concerns and that Aiyeru is already, under the guise of a safe, peaceful village, engaged in spreading its ideas through those children of Aiyeru who live outside the community. Ahime does not immediately enlighten Ofeyi (the reader also remains uninformed), but he is pleased with Ofeyi's plans and, in fact, half expected for such a messenger to appear. Apart from that it is the writing technique of Wole Soyinka that he uses the mythical allegories in his writings also. Hence the novel is no exception. Ofeyi and Iriyise are given names easily identifiable with Orpheus and Eurydice. Consistently with Soyinka's embodiment of that Orpheus-Eurydice myth, the captive abductee in the novel is Iriyise, substituting his narrative technique. (Izevbaye 1981) The fictional and autobiographical element are mixed together in the novel where Soyinka's prison experiences are merged together in the continuum that the imprisoned writer perceives between the repressive, degrading regimen of prison life and the fascist system choking life outside the prison in crisis-ridden, war torn Nigeria. The chief elder, the Custodian of the Grain, even chooses Ofeyi, an outsider, to replace him— a startling and incredible proposal which Ofeyi rejects, for it entails being both the spiritual and the physical propagator of the species in Aiyeru. Yet Ofeyi does figuratively take on the job—Wole Soyinka describes a mystical merger of the two during the old man's funeral—when Ofeyi asks Ahime for the right to use Aiyeru men in a two-year campaign to challenge the government Cartel and the Corporation. While such activities are already going on, Ahime welcomes Ofeyi's role as organizer.

The reminder of the action in the novel is, it would see, a consequence of Ofeyi's efforts. The government reacts violently to the subversion and military conflict results. With the exception of one or two incidents, however, Soyinka does not show Ofeyi engaged in his propaganda campaign. The

populace responds to the government repression with violent outbursts over which neither Ofeyi nor anyone else seems to have any control. The country remains in a state of chaos. As Ahime warns, one who sows the wind will reap the whirlwind. Ofeyi wanders through the chaos observing the consequences of sowing the seed of rebellion. The section headings follow the progress of natural organic growth: "Seminal", "Buds", "Tentacles", "Harvest" and "Spores". The central section ambiguously refers both to feelers on the growing plants and to feelers on the heads of insects (the Cartel) that try to destroy the plants. Ofeyi, as Custodian of the Grain, discovers the difficulty and awesome responsibility of his role.

Ofeyi does not participate in the military conflict at all. The discontented people in the country, led by Ahime and the men of Aiyeru, do the actual fighting. Ofeyi meets one of those guerrillas during his journey abroad early in the novel: Demakin, "the Dentist", whose special role is the selective assassination of the Cartel's leaders. Ofeyi knows that Demakin and other Aiyeru men are engaged in the struggle, but he does not discover until the end that Ahime himself was the general on the field of battle. Ofeyi emerges out as an African aspirant when he remains there, except on one occasion when he is forced to kill a man in self-defense, the intellectual behind the scenes, and the voice of the people. As such, however, the Cartel recognizes him as a threat and tries to arrest him. Ofeyi spends most of the novel as a political criminal on the run.

Ofeyi's primary role in the second half of the novel, as Custodian of the Grain, while it appears to be merely personal, is actually communal. When he first goes to Aiyeru, his mistress, Iriyise, accompanies him. Even before he recognizes the significance of the community, she becomes a part of it. As a sexual symbol, she is Aiyeru's vital principle; her sexual essence remains perverted, and she too finds now her rightful place. She feels unable to rest there long, however, before one of the four members of the Cartel, Ahuri, the Cross-River chief, abducts her. The female characters in this way find in Soyinka's novel a distinctive role as Boyce Davies states:

A feminist reading of Soyinka reveals enough female stereotypes to suggest a definite sexist bias against women. Additionally, an examination of the characteristic of these women produces the distinct impression that the author is conjuring up the image of the same, ideal woman over and over again. (Boyce 1986:6)

The fact that two of these nonfiction works, *Ak'e* (1981) and *Isara* (1990), have won huge critical acclaim on the scale of the successes of his most accomplished works of drama and poetry would seem to indicate that the place of prose in the Nigerian author's literary corpus ought to be far more carefully explored than the term 'novel,' with its tangled African vocation and its more general problematic status in contemporary world literature – a form whose "death" is perennially bruited and withdrawn. (Jeyifo 2004: 170) A tentacle reached out and steals the life force in the seed. The novel from that point onward, like Ofeyi's search for her by risking his life, he travels north to Cross-River, into the center of the conflict, where he finally discovers her in a prison full of work gangs, lunatics, and lepers. With the help of Ahime and

Demakin, he rescues her, but she remains in coma. The battle with the Cartel is temporarily lost, and the group returns to Aiyeru for the dormant season. As Ahime describes it at the beginning, Aiyeru which is a resting place. The novel ends with hope that Iriyise would be awakened, and that new seeds would support in spring season. Again it is the hope of happiness and prosperity. As Soyinka himself admits that 'the novel was written at a period when it was (also) not possible for me to function in the theatre. So I don't consider myself a novelist. And the novel form for me is not a very congenial form.' (Soyinka 1992)

Ofeyi, as the center of consciousness, is the novel's protagonist. Soyinka clearly distinguishes him from the other character, not so much by giving him distinctive personality traits but by making him a representative Everyman. He is both a hero and an antihero. While engaging in the political struggle and committing himself to the serious and dangerous confrontations, he never actually becomes one of the guerrillas; the battle was over before he arrives in Cross-River, and his only violent act was forced upon him. His primary act in the novel's main structure is rescuing Iriyise, yet even in this he seems to move confusedly through events that work themselves out independently from him. He is an observer of the action, maintaining his moral integrity through his intelligent, creative responses. Yet he is blind to the things that go on around him. He does not, for example, fully appreciate the controlling authority of Ahime until the end. The actual events in Ofeyi's life are deadly serious, yet he moves through them at times with an almost comic air. His philosophical idealism, makes him constantly aware of the moral nature of his choices, is both necessary and debilitating. He spends as much time in reflecting, debating, and hesitating as he does acting out his decisions in the practical world of affairs. The confusion that pervades the scene at large is present also inside Ofeyi's own consciousness. Because the reader sees what Ofeyi sees, he, too, must live through the experiences before he understands. Ofeyi begins the action by fantasizing that he will be Shelleyian propagator of revolutionary seeds, in search of golden era. (Larson 1972) He fulfills his role but comes to realize, as the reader does, that he is only one member of a larger community and that events are being controlled by others, or by no one. Heroic behavior may be possible and effective but always takes place within a chaotic environment that seems unyielding and that humbles the actor.

Soyinka clearly defines the classic confrontation between man and his environment within an African context. As well as being Everyman, Ofeyi is the Yoruba God Ogun, the most important, and certainly the most dynamic and complex god in the pantheon, who at the beginning of time traversed the chaotic abyss to link human beings and their gods. Ogun's act symbolizes the central human experience, the building of bridges out of chaos. Yet the mythical experience teaches that the chaos almost overwhelms the god and that only an act of the will can save him. For numerous times during the novel, Ofeyi almost gives up and is tempted to choose the path of Tailla, the representative of Eastern mysticism; at the end, the forces of chaos literally knocked him towards unconsciousness. Yet he fulfills the role of Ogun when he recovers and one final time asserts his individual identity. His survival is not only physical but also psychological and moral.

The other characters function more as representatives than as particularized individuals. Ahime is the father figure; he

feels profoundly the moral and psychological realities that Ofeyi as a young man is being initiated into, but he detached himself from the chaotic buffetings and rides smoothly above the turbulence. He lives consistently according to his principles, the operative one for him in the novel remains freedom of choice. Soyinka defines Ahime in relation to Ofeyi. He wants Ofeyi to join in the fight against the government, but he neither says anything nor creates any situation that might put pressure on him. At the same time, Soyinka defines him in relation to his community. As the repository of traditional African values, Ahime carries out his role as the ritual priest. Ahime represents the relatively passive god Obatala, who remains in the realm of the gods while Ogun makes his journey

across the abyss. Even outside Aiyeru, on the field of battle, he retains his philosophical composure. Other characters that fit the mythological scheme are Demakin and Iriyise, Demakin already makes a moral decision about his function in the public world. He represents the warrior aspect of Ogun. Iriyise is a typically African conception of womanhood; without any Puritan or otherwise Western inhibitions about sexuality, she unites sensual and spiritual ideals. For this reason, she merges easily into the culture of Aiyeru, where nature and man live in harmonious balance. By the time of her journey in North and her abduction, Soyinka transforms her into a Yoruba symbol of the original oneness, the goddess Orisa-nla.

## References

1. Beier, Ulli. *The Return of the Gods: The Sacred Art of Susanne Wenger*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973.
2. Bieden, Jeyifo. *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. Cornell University: Cambridge, 2004. Print.
3. Boyce –Davies, Carole and Anne Adams Graves. *Maidens, Mistresses and Matrons; Feminine Images in Selected Soyinka's Works in Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. New Jersey: Africa World Pries, 1986.
4. Egudu, R.N. "Criticism of Modern African Literature: The Question of Evaluation." *World Literature Written in English*. 21: 1982. 54-67.