
Satire and Conflict in Wole Soyinka's Act: The Trials of Brother Jero

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ABSTRACT

Wole Soyinka was born at Abeokuto in Nigeria on 13 July, 1934. He awakened African people against British Tyranny by his plays and writings. He was sent in jail for many times. Wole Soyinka was influenced by the brilliant Shakespearean scholar G. Wilson Knight. After preparatory university studies in 1954 at Government College in Ibadan, he continued at the University of Leeds, where, later, in 1973, he took his doctorate. During the six years spent in England, he was a dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre in London 1958-1959. In 1960, he was awarded a Rockefeller bursary and returned to Nigeria to study African drama. At the same time, he taught drama and literature at various universities in Ibadan, Lagos, and Ife, where, since 1975, he has been professor of comparative literature. In 1960, he founded the theatre group, "The 1960 Masks" and in 1964, the "Orisun Theatre Company", in which he has produced his own plays and taken part as actor. He has periodically been visiting professor at the universities of Cambridge, Sheffield, and Yale. Wole Soyinka has always been a political figure. At the time of the Nigerian Civil war, 1966-1970, he tried to broke a ceasefire between the federal government and the Biafran rebels who wanted to secede from the Nigerian nation state. Soyinka was placed in solitary confinement for two years for not being anti-Biafran enough to suit the leaders of Nigeria. He was released only after a lot of international campaigning against his arrest. His experience in solitary confinement is recounted in his autobiography *The Man Died* (1972), which is packed with conversations, interviews, interrogations and other exchanges between the author and military personnel. After release from solitary confinement, he went into voluntary 6 exile in 1972. He then worked as a lecturer, held a fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge, and wrote three important plays, *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973), *The Bacchae* (1973), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). In 1975 Soyinka moved to Accra, Ghana, becoming an editor of Africa's leading intellectual journal *Transition*. After a coup deposed President Gowon in 1975, Soyinka returned to Nigeria and was appointed professor of English at the University of Ife. His soul left his body in 2014.

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Wole Soyinka was influenced by the brilliant Shakespearean scholar G. Wilson Knight. After preparatory university studies in 1954 at Government College in Ibadan, he continued at the University of Leeds, where, later, in 1973, he took his doctorate. During the six years spent in England, he was a dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre in London 1958-1959. In 1960, he was awarded a Rockefeller bursary and returned to Nigeria to study African drama. At the same time, he taught drama and literature at various universities in Ibadan, Lagos, and Ife, where, since 1975, he has been professor of comparative literature. In 1960, he founded the theatre group, "The 1960 Masks" and in 1964, the "Orisun Theatre Company", in which he has produced his own plays and taken part as actor. He has periodically been visiting professor at the universities of Cambridge, Sheffield, and Yale.

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Wole Soyinka is highly individualistic writer, who has personalized dramatic art to his advantage. Through the depth of his imagination, he has made the language of drama metaphorical, and has evolved his own unique set of images. These images portray his personal world, and reflect his individual outlook of life.

On a general premonition, one feels that Soyinka is of the opinion that both sides of conflicting fractions should come together for a possible union of values because they both have their positive as well as negative sides that they can both depend on.

THE TRIALS OF BROTHER JERO (1963)

Satire, as a form of discourse, has always been used to make fun of the foolish or evil behaviour of men and how they run societal institutions. Since satire is not only used to criticize but also to

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reform, Wole Soyinka's interest in using satire is to explore in depth the sociopolitical situation of contemporary Africa and to analyze the nature of contemporary man whose psyche runs along with *'The Trials of Brother Jero'*, the playwright offers to awaken the consciousness of the people and make society come to terms with the nature of their problems which is a precondition to solving them. With this text, Wole Soyinka satirizes the gullibility of contemporary man who thinks his psychological needs can be solved by prayers and religion. In this, the playwright exposes the socio-political malaise of contemporary Nigeria: malaise in religion and leadership by articulating religious hypocrisy, moral decadence and family squabbles. The play is a satire on an unscrupulous preacher who turns Christian religion into a profit making business.

To get his message across, Wole Soyinka exploits the relationship between minor characters like Brother Jero's assistant, Chume, his wife Amope, the member of parliament and his worshippers to show to his readers on the one hand that the attitude of Brother Jero in his text is not distance from what we see in the large society where business partners or debtors (Chume as well as his wife) as try to get rid of their creditors so that they will no more be asked to settle what they owe and on the other hand show the weakness of some so called sanctimonious men of God and the unquestioning devotion some gullible people show to these leaders. In this sense, Soyinka is able to handle many themes simultaneously without endangering the reality of his characters with the use of music, songs and dance in the background. Psychological or spiritual themes are important to him as social ones. Through the use of songs, dance, music and drum beating, he has portrayed the characters' conflict, fear, the complexities and the problems of the human heart.

The most significant aspect of Soyinka's work, many critics have noted, lies in his approach to literature as a serious agent of social change and his radical commitment to promoting human rights in Nigeria. Critics believe that the humour and compassion evident in his plays to mark this end, as well as his unquestioning portrayal of the consequences of political greed and oppression, add a universal significance to his portrayals of his own Nigerian life. Through the use of irony, sarcasm, and of satire, he attacks the socio political vices as seen in his contemporary Nigerian society. Most critics see Soyinka's satire as an attack on societal ills with the intention that can bring transformation or change. He employs the use of images and symbolism to castigate his own society. Thus, he carves characters to match the situation he presents in his fictional work. The characters that are presented in his drama text through their behavior, deeds and what they say can be likened to people and situations in real life. Through what they say and do, he satirizes his own society. The preoccupation of the playwright is to explore human condition by presenting and analyzing the absurdities, abnormalities and ills inherent herein. To him, the artist should be the vision of his people and through his satirical writing; he believes transformation can be achieved. With this play, Wole Soyinka exposes the point of weakness of his society and intends to make his society come to terms with the nature of their problems which is an indispensable step towards solving them.

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The purpose of this play is to show how the playwright has used his text as a mechanism by which he exposes the ills and vices of his society such as the lust for materialism, moral and spiritual bankrupt and exploitation in the light of the Aristotelian's unities of time, place and action. An attempt will be made to sort out satirical elements which the playwright thinks can suit his artistic responsibility.

Satire

According to the *Dictionary of Literary Terms (1977)*, satire is a literary work intended to arouse ridicule, contempt and follies of man and institutions; and its primary aim is to correct malpractice by inspiring both indignation and laughter with the mixture of criticism and wit.

From this definition, the one which I think best fits this essay is formulated from the combination of its corrective intent and its literary method of execution. In the context of this play, the definition of satire is:

"A literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humor and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved. The true satirist is conscious of the frailty of institutions of man's devising and attempts through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling" (Thrall, et al 436).

A text or performance that uses irony and disrespect, to expose or attack human vice, foolishness or stupidity is satirical. Thus, the essence of satire is to ridicule the ills of an individual or an institution with the aim of correcting and transforming the society and in the process mould people's character. From satirical writings, readers derive satisfaction because through all these, we are able to experience a code of conduct which may apply to our daily lives. Some novels, poems and plays constitute a composition in which folly or vice is held up to ridicule or to expose folly. In the African context, as a literary genre, satire is considered as any expression that makes fun of an institution or an individual. For that matter, it draws the attention of the reader and to the society to their vices with the aim of making appropriate or adequate adjustment or amendment and; is most often considered as a tool which brings about societal transformation. To a greater extent, it should cut across geographical boundaries because human beings are the same all over the world.

For my own concern, I will concentrate on political and social contradictions for the primary aim of any satire is to ridicule so that a correction can be affected. An institution, a particular behavior in the society, a government and a political party can be made fun of so that a correction can be made. I shall explore the bitter and funny language used by the playwright to put his message of disillusion across. Although there is a little bit of exaggeration and burlesque in the play, some of the events described are realistic in nature; all these are designed to make the situation vivid and more interesting so mat when the truths underlying the situations are revealed

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to the reader, the fun becomes grim and biting. It is in this view that Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Trials of Brother Jero* are written. They are considered as sociopolitical satires. Before I examine what satirical elements are contained in Soyinka's drama text, it will be interesting to know the plot-thematic of the play. Recipient of the *1986 Nobel Prize for Literature*, Soyinka through his nonfiction works and essays has established an international reputation as an unflinching critic on sociopolitical injustice inherent in post-colonial African societies.

Wole Soyinka's play, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, is a satire which pokes fun at religious hypocrisy in Contemporary Nigeria. Soyinka's interest is to use it as a potent weapon to mock political and religious shortcomings, expose and analyze the egoistic tendencies of some people who are entrusted with the mandate of leading the masses. The playwright's concern is to enumerate the relevance of satire for the correction of socio political ills of his own country which he considers as the microcosm of the macrocosm. He holds the psychology of people who think that their needs can only be satisfied by religion to ridicule. Thus in the form of a preacher called Brother Jero, he makes him preach to his followers whom he calls "customers" on Bar Beach in Lagos, Nigeria, in their lust for materialism.

Prophet Jero is presented to the reader as a rogue who manipulates and keeps his "gullible" followers in a subservient position for he is able to read from their minds what they long for: money, social status, and power. Thus when the play opens, we see Brother Jero claiming that he is a "prophet by birth and by inclination" (10) and tries as much as possible to convince people that although there are many prophets they are not at all the same. The prophet, then, uses a pun to show that the more prophets there are the more different they are. Thus, he states: "eggs is eggs" (10) which means in English "they're all the same"; but this he denies and sustains. Really, as he says he is different from other prophets. He keeps people dissatisfied for once they are satisfied they will leave him. He believes that as long as they are unhappy, worried and dissatisfied, they will continually seek his service for prophesying. This is contrary to the message of freedom and choice that Christianity spells to its followers. Brother Jero's philosophy of keeping people dissatisfied and helpless does not conform to basic Christian ethics.

Wole Soyinka uses the protagonist to show that the attitude of some religious leaders negate to a greater extent what they preach. For instance, the exploitative manner of the prophet is contained in the expression of calling his followers "customers" (20) and he himself, a "shopkeeper" (20). The first victim of this system is the old prophet under whose tutelage he grew. In fact, he pretends to help the old man acquire land on the beach, but denies him the same land. Helpless and frustrated, he cursed him for his ungratefulness: "*Ingrate! Monster! I curse you with the curse of the Daughters of Discord. May they be your downfall? May the daughters of Eve bring ruin down on your head?*"(11).The narrator in these words shows the reader that the pretentious and exploitative manner of the prophet lies in his relationship with his followers.

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He is presented as being part of the clergymen who takes delight in preaching in the open, on the public beach in this context, because they lack churches. Soyinka presents him as an unscrupulous preacher who is much more interested in greed than in saving the soul of the people by saying convincingly that "the call of prophecy is in [his] blood" (11). To some extent, the prophet tries as much as possible to gain credibility by prophesying the future of his followers and that of the working class. For instance, Chume, his assistant, is a messenger who suffers from two serious problems; firstly, he seeks advancement in his career and secondly, he seeks relief from his bad-tempered wife, Amope, who has made his life very unbearable reducing him into a very humiliating state. In another instance, we see the MP bowing to the prophet because he wants to be promoted. In the process, he convinces them that they will soon be able to fulfill these materialistic desires if they are faithful to him. Thus, Chume, the messenger and the likely successor of the prophet, vainly seeks relief from his scolding wife Amope. Amope, Chume's shrewish wife, is a market woman to whom Jero owes money: the sum of "one pound eight shillings nine pence" (14). She continually harasses him for the money he owes her for at least three months.

The reader here is aware that Chume is Amope's husband. Brother Jero is Chume's Boss and the house where Chume brings his wife to lay siege is Jero's own house; but Chume and his Boss are all ignorant of this. While Brother Jero and Amope are partners in trade and that they have shared a relationship of customer and seller, Amope and Chume are partners in marriage; but the characters themselves are ignorant to this situation. So, Brother Jero, Chume and Amope are unaware of the happenings and circumstances, both present and future, unlike the audience. Dramatic irony is a technique used by Wole Soyinka to show that the characters in the play are ignorant of the true situation, whereas the reader or audience is aware of what is happening in the plot and what will come next. The characters in the plot are sympathized by the reader as they are unaware of the plot. The playwright uses this method to keep the reader engaged in the story and enables him to predict certain circumstances for the characters.

Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1963) is the first of his three "Jero" plays. With this play, he brings to limelight topical issues that are integral to modern society which many people do not know for over five scenes in the play. The MP's lust for social status as used by Soyinka is to lash political leaders in contemporary society. Soyinka's plays, novels and essays reflect, no doubt, his commitment to social welfare. This has always attracted the ire of the status quo. Soyinka has been imprisoned several times for his criticism of the Nigerian government. From the 1970s, he has lived long periods in exile lecturing the entire world over. Soyinka's plays range from comedy to tragedy and from political satire to the theatre of the absurd. To put his message of disillusion across, he has successfully combined influences from Western traditions with African myth, legends and folklore, and such techniques as singing and drumming to make his work an original one. Since then, his works have been appraised as a corrective instrument for solving societal problems.

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SATIRICAL ELEMENTS IN WOLE SOYINKA'S PLAY

For the playwright, man's vices constitute a threat to the culture in which the satirist himself lives, and for that matter, feels obliged to expose those vices for the society's own good on the one hand and for his own on the other, in a way that will allow the ones attacked to modulate a new direction for correction. Satire is, most of the time, presented in a manner which brings action in a world full of complacent hypocrites. In a word, the purpose of satire is the correction or deterrence of vice, and its method is to attack hypocrisy through the ironic contrast between values and actions.

Thus, in *The Trials of Brother Jero*, Soyinka treated social satire which is obtainable in contemporary Nigeria with dexterity. He is ridiculing human and institutional follies with the intention of correcting them. As was said earlier on, my task here is to hint at satirical elements or thrusts of Wole Soyinka in the play under consideration. Let us try to enumerate satirical elements which might have inspired the playwright. The first one is religious hypocrisy; and this delineates Soyinka's wit at religious beliefs and institutions. This is going to be analyzed through the behavior of Jeroboam's followers whom he called "customers" (20).

CONCLUSION

This chapter on the *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Trials of Brother Jero* has discussed the critical nature of one of Wole Soyinka's most popular plays bringing to the fore societal issues. In this the playwright has depicted an unscrupulous preacher, the main character, who is much more, interested in greed than in salvation of his worshippers. The play is a straightforward one about, societal, religious and political corruption in his Nigeria. He has used Christian themes articulated in symbols, and myths to put his message across. His use of "water symbolism" is very impressive. Wole Soyinka satirizes false prophets who capitalize on the gullibility of his loyal followers. I think that critics like Wole Soyinka show that the role he has to play is to raise the consciousness of the people and whip them into revolutionary action. His artistic forms reflect his ideological stand which to a greater stand pushes him to use satire and ridicule as "corrective narrative techniques" to enlighten his society which is suffering from moral depravity. The despair that pervades Soyinka's works, which portray the oppressed as suffering from material want, psychologically and physically, awakens and enhances the playwright's political stand. Wole Soyinka has used a real language of helplessness - pidgin - to translate and express the actions and speeches of the prophet's victims; his characters who, with optimism will look forward to remaking their world.

It should be emphasized that African writers are producing artistic works that show that the history, culture, and civilization of post colonial Africa needs to be reread. To come to this end, these writers apply pathos and emotive power of their works to instigate new oppressors in their societies and to initiate a political and economic reorganization of their society in the interest of the oppressed majority.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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