

Wole Soyinka's Social Vision and his Dramatic Portrayal of the Different Aspects of the Post - Colonial African Society in his Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This is an attempt to touch upon the common features of Commonwealth Literature draining attention to the unified personality of Wole Soyinka whose poems picture the issues that confront the newly born independent nation and also to issues that confront the writer advocating a peculiar sort of heroic values based upon the 'creative dare' of the isolated individual.

Key words: *Social Vision, Dramatic Portrayal.*

Generally speaking literatures of such new nations as Africa, West Indies, Pakistan have been grouped under commonwealth Literature which is multicultural over a period of time, the literature of these countries came to mean post colonial literatures which have been described as literatures dealing with nation's culture affected by the imperial power from the moment of colonization to the present day. The writer's role is to seek the roots and the trend in the revolutionary struggle. A new literature is something which is to express a culture that has grown up with the settler communities; it maybe a continuation of indigenous cultural violation, some mixture of the effects of colonization including the bringing together of various races into one nation and thus the role of new literature is to express and reflect par excellence the historical process by which new societies have been inscribed in the collective imagination of emerging countries.

The post colonial writers had to choose a language that would be appealing to the natives in the process of their getting back into their culture and promoting national unity. The dialectal variety of their languages and English had to be used. Igbo and English were used by writers like Chinua Achebe, Nigeria with its Yoruba history an ethnic group to which culture Wole Soyinka belongs has its own language myth and religion. Many writers in English from the African and Caribbean colonies took up the call to include literature as a moving spirit in the nationalist struggle, and writers were invoked as the beacons, Soothsayers and seers of political movements. It was seen as a writer's role to interpret the world to grasp the initiative in Cultural self - definition.

In the colonial societies, literature developed only in the second half of the 19th century. The main development of the 1930's was a protest literature often influenced by socialism and sociology.

Influenced by the social realism of the 1930's with its emphasis on dialect, urban slums, small towns, poverty stricken lives, local conditions, minorities, under dogs and social injustice, literature shifted its focus from European elite culture to that of the majority of the inhabitants of the colony or dominion. Such writing in its subject matter, themes languages and empathy laid the foundations for the national literature that began to emerge during the years. The new literatures are nothing but the products of colonial and post colonial societies of naturalism and modernization. A dual process of modernization and creating national culture has been in evolution since the start of colonialism. It was first noticeable in the late 19th century and has quickened, Lewis N Kosi holds :

“Self - sacrifice, individual quest, the isolation of the gifted Or mained individual from society and the greater likelihood that Such an isolation ill - produce an individual with vision, capable of discovering the abiding truths of human existence - these are all the common themes in African literature” (p 93).

The need for art to have human relevance has been emphasized by a Nigerian critic Kolawole Ogunorbesan who said that the writer is a member of society and his sensibility is conditioned by the social and political happenings around him, for these issues form a part of the substance of life within which his instinct as a writer struggles.

Modern African literature, as opposed to traditional manifestation, is an artistic study of the African Predicament from the colonial era, through the time of the attainment of political independence to the post -

independence era. And it is from this point of view that modern African literature not only manifests glaring human relevance, but also reflects the writer's awareness of social coupled with an imaginative response to that reality. The modern African writers are said to have reflected life in the African society during the colonial and post - colonial periods, Drama's fiction, short - stories, critical writings dealt with the post - colonial elements highlighting human predicament.

Poetry , like all other genres, has man with his life as its raw material. Modern African poetry, therefore, keeping to this tradition of poetry, is intimately concerned with the African people in the African Society, with their life in its various ramifications - cultural social, economic, intellectual and political. It endeavours to give us a new version and assessment of that life, to present it to us interpreted and redressed by the artistic genius and craftsmanship of the poets. It is from these deeply convictions that Soyinka's works, both literary and social flow.

Wole Soyinka is a unified personality in whom the artist and the man are one. A close reading of his poems makes one understand how far . Soyinka gives expression to the African (Nigerian) Sensibility for picturing the issues that confront the newly born independent nation. He is one writer whose life is inseparable from his work his poetic art focusses on a passionate and most desperate concern for his society, rousing enthusiastic support or bitter opposition. He constantly insists that he is not committed to any ideology. There can be a few writers who believe more deeply in freedom and are prepared to sacrifice as much for it.

In his words,

“I believe there is no reason why human beings should not enjoy maximum freedom. In living together in society, we agree to lose some of our freedom. To detract from the maximum freedom socially possible, to me, is treacherous, I do not believe in dictatorship benevolent or malevolent” (pp 5-6).

Wole Soyinka, one of the major talents of the Contemporary theatre and a great critic of the African scene, besides being a mode of understanding Africa and its literature as well as its related issues, has been in the best British tradition of writers who are also critics. Besides Chinua Achebe he has been in the line of Ben Johnson, Philip Sydney, Dr. Johnson Coleridge , Arnold and T.S. Eliot who did a great deal in influencing him more as a writer. C.D. Narasimhaiah writes :

“Soyinka like Chinua Achebe explores the vitality of African part in the interest of the present; corrects prejudices and mis understanding of those who are strangers to it and emphasizes the centrality of languages for creative and critical purposes. Soyinka does not write about an African problem but a universal one” (Narasimhaiah 45).

Though Soyinka was influenced by many, his individualism made him deviate from conformism and nonconformist to the ideal. His imagery ranges from tropical yarn roots to the falling acorns of Tigel and he naturally chose to treat man mainly through the African environment.

Soyinka, besides establishing a reputation in the theatre with plays like *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), *The Road* (1965) and his superb comedy *The Lion and the Jewel*, established his name as a poet of repute also, through the publication of his two collections of verse, *Idandre* and other poems (1967) and *A Shuttle in the crypt* (1972). Whatever the genres - the novel, the plays and the poems , Soyinka’s central preoccupation is with a reordering of African society and the creation of a new African sensibility? His work concentrates both on its reworking of myth and general observations on contemporary African society, Soyinka believes that the contemporary African society can salvage something from its past. Otherwise there would be very little value in his present exercise.

As a poet, novelist and dramatist, Soyinka is rightly appalled at the inauthenticity of many aspects of African society, at the internecine struggles are seemingly endless cruelties and bloodshed which are the outcome of the furious contest for control among the different segments of the new civilian / military bureaucracies. Unlike many African writers, Soyinka never subscribed too much to the negritude myth of a once innocent Africa, a black Garden of Eden, which had to await the advent of White Colonialism before happily succumbing to Evil, on the contrary, he sees human society including the African society as caught up in an eternal cycle of Karmas that has become the evil history of man’. The underlying motivation in Soyinka’s work seems to be a search for authentic values in a degraded world. He advocates a peculiar sort of heroic values based upon the ‘creative dare’ of the isolated individual.

Such is ideal which Soyinka holds out towards the end of his long poem *Idanre* :

..... he who guards the creative Flint
Walks, purged spirit, contemptuous
of womb - yearnings
He shall teach us to ignite our
several kilns
And glory in each bronzed
emergence" (p. 82)

If current African literature answers to a feeling of dislocation and a sense of incoherence which continue to grip the African society in its post - colonial phase, Soyinka's major writings can be seen as one writer's responses in a number of ways but his most efficacious weapon has been 'satire'. From the very beginning, in poems like 'Telephone Conversation' or 'The other Immigrant', Soyinka showed just how sharply he could press the knife. 'Civilian and Soldier' is a more somber poem but Soyinka her never been able to resist the ridicule of the dull - witted and insensitive:

"You stood still for both eternities
and Oh! heard the lesson of your
training Sessions, cantioning Scorch
earth behind you, do not leave A
dubious neutral to the rear" (p. 53)

Poems like 'Telephone Conservation' 'Death at Dawn' Season or Massacre October 66 may treat different events dealing with a variety of emotions but what makes them successful as poems is their combination of a critical realism with an uncluttered simplicity of line releases the experience from the usually dense coagulation of his syntax. The African poet is always engaged in struggle to maintain his essential identity against the constructing measures of another language or tongue. Ogun has been Wole Soyinka's

divine mentor, Muse and his metaphor. Ogun manifests a temperament for artistic creativity matched by technological proficiency. His world is the world of craft , song and poetry. Ogun is not only a metaphor for Soyinka but also the source of material ideas and allusions. It is through the use of Ogun myth Soyinka displays a wide cultural perspective. Ogun is the Prime ancor of Soyinka's ideological and aesthetic dispositions.

Soyinka defines Ogun as the Yoruba God of iron and Metallurgy, Explorer , Artisan, Hunter, God of War Guardian parts, the Road of the creative essence, His season is harvest and rains. He is unpredictable, contradictory and violent, protector of orphans terrible guardian of the sacred oath. He is the Lord of the road of Ifa; that is he opens the way to the heart of Ifa's wisdom. The poems of the Road in *Idanre* and other Poems' are esoterically uniformed by the Ogun myth. 'Dawn ' for instance is a celebration of masculine, physical, violent and productive force;

"O celebration of the rites of the
dawn
Night - spread in tatters and a god
Received, flame with Kennels" (Dawn)

'Dawn' is thus an allegorical coming of Ogun to spread fertility on earth and its people. This poem is related to the harvest, a section of *Idenre* to which Ogun and the poet behold fruitfulness at dawn as they come down from the rockhills of *Idenre*. Death in the 'Dawn' is similarly related to Ogun. The god is partially blamed for car accidents that claim victims. The uncertainty of life is noted in the communal force of which Ogun is a 'deity' Man's destiny is governed by his

death and the man himself. Ogun like the poet is an inspirer Ogun in some of Soyinka's becomes not merely the God of war but the god of revolution in the context of apartheid problem that existed in South Africa. It is through Ogun myth that Soyinka makes statements about human existence and he interprets contemporary life through the same.

The Nigerian civil war (1967 - 70) which was the culminating point of the series of political crises without country since 1962 has provided some of the Nigerian poets with the opportunity of manifesting through art the nature of their feelings about life and human values. The war period a period of death has thus become a period of poetic harvest. Wole Soyinka J.P. Clark and Chinna Achebe have published books of their war poems in which the civil war has been presented as a deadly event in the nation's history. Wole Soyinka looks at war from a general point of view in Idenre. Here in this poem, war is shown to be a two - sided sword cutting its owner as well as his enemy. The Central character is Ogun, the Yoruba ambivalent god of creation and destruction, who indeed is himself a true symbol of the ambivalent nature of war as Soyinka sees it. Thus when men invited this god to lead them in a war against their enemies, he spared the enemies and destroyed his clients :

Lust - blind god, gore - drunk Hunter
Monster deity, you destroy your
men! (p.85)

Because of this, Soyinka feels he is a guest no one can recall just as war is an event , no same people can wish to experience twice. So the poet warns :

To bring a god to super is devout,
yet

A Wise host keeps his distance till

The Sprint one has dined his fill (p.86)

This caution is necessary because Soyinka feels that men often go beyond logical limits in their search for the solutions to their problems.

In his later poems Soyinka dealt specifically with the Nigerian Civil war - Thus in 'When Seasons Change' the present generation made up of the organizers of the war is shown to have blindly refused to heed the lessons of the past. The ghosts of war evade guardian ship of predecessors and come to the earth bringing with them old hints and old truths upheld in mirrors of the hour. Soyinka's anger about the war has been directed mostly towards those dwarfs who like midwives, delivered the war. During the war, intellectuals were prevented from using their minds freely some writers had to shape their thinking, even their vision in accordance with the directives from the establishment . They could not criticize government but Wole Soyinka wanted to express himself independently of government orders and in a manner thought to be against the stand of government in the whole issue; and for this reason, perhaps, he was imprisoned during the war. It is remarkable that his own creative mind could not be chained down by the opposing forces, for while in prison, he wrote the poems. By adorning varying the tone of this poem commenting in places, using apt punctuation paying attention to details around him, the poet successfully recreates the situation.

To conclude, Soyinka has a social vision and feels that an African writer has a greater role in the shaping of his country's development and growth. Soyinka as a dramatist takes a different approach to drama. To him, the role of a writer in the African scenario is to create a rhythm that makes African life meaningful. He believes that African poetry as a medium is supposed to express man's formal responses to his experiences in the society. Soyinka's main concerns are regeneration, renewal and healing of the African society. Regeneration to Soyinka has been in a process of spiritual rehabilitation of the people of African continent, a process of integrating the fragmented and even distorted consciousness of the people who were brutalized and denigrated;

"The quest for racial self - retrieval, he observes, is not only a logical dimension of the process of decolonization but a realistic reaction to the actuality of internal betrayal experienced everywhere by the New African society" (Soyinka 136).

Soyinka who has been interested in synthesizing and idealizing his thoughts

could shape them by delving into Yoruba tradition and beliefs though he was born into Christian family. His social concerns are the result his leaning on the past which could also provide solutions to the present socio - political cultural and individual problems. If looked at in totality, his works reveal that Soyinka was appalled at the different aspects of the post - colonial African society. His works thus seem to be a search for authentic values in a degraded society.

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Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world.

~ **Harriet Tubman**