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Original Research Article

Is it Obscurity or the Polemics of Symbolism?: A Study of Wole Soyinka's Poetry

Abstract

Some critics and scholars have actually overblown the issue of obscurity in the poetry of Wole Soyinka. These critics have succeeded in making a myth out of this perceived obscurity. Admittedly, his poems are not easily accessible to the average reader, but with a little effort, one finds them as interesting as they are rewarding. Symbolism is a major feature in his poetry. It is difficult to come across a direct statement in his poems. Like the Symbolist poets, he places his faith in the personal, the subjective and the associative. He portrays the realities of his experiences through the use of images and symbols which evoke a certain emotional feeling in the reader. Despite the charges of obscurity and impenetrability made against Soyinka by critics, it is very rewarding to study his poetry. Soyinka, as a matter of fact, has enormous experiences that he wants to convey; and to do this effectively, he uses an assemblage of imagery, symbolism, and allusion to delineate his poetic trajectory. The thesis I posit is that Soyinkaâ€™s poetry is neither difficult nor obscure but rather glows with a rich resource of symbolism in the order of the symbolist poets. This critical inquiry is anchored on the concept of symbolism.

Introduction

A symbol carries meaning beyond itself and represents another. Akwanya (2010), citing Kristeva and Carl Jung distinguishes “two systems of representation: representation by the symbol and by the sign, each one constituted by a specific function, which she calls ‘ideologemes’” (*Semantics,* 207). Both Goethe and Coleridge stress that symbol presents only one image, remains indefinite, but boundlessly suggestive in its significance. Carl Jung sees symbol as something ‘unknown’ that cannot be made clear and precise.

Symbolism is a major feature in the poetry of Wole Soyinka. Consequently, just as he says of Okigbo’s poetry, Dan Izevbaye finds “three features of symbolist theory that are relevant to the discussion”, I dare say, also of the poetry of Wole Soyinka. These are “a rejection of ‘meaning’ or ‘communication’ in the ordinary sense, an emphasis on the poet’s unity of being, and thirdly, an attempt to preserve the integrity of art by an aesthetic

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withdrawal ….” However, symbolism may mean different things to different people. However, for the purposes of this paper, the term has been used in the same sense as it was used by Austin Warren: “symbolism may be defined as imagery understood to imply a conceptual meaning” (125).

According to Symons, the aim of any artist who writes in the symbolist tradition is “not so much to communicate his thoughts to others as to give them suggestions which will induce them to think and dream for themselves” (8). The poetry of Soyinka has yielded itself to many contested readings and criticisms. Some scholars and critics have described his poetry as obscure and difficult to understand. However, I neither find Soyinka’s poetry obscure nor difficult. In his poetry, I find a preponderance of figurative images that yield to poetic figurations and colourations. In his epistemological essay, “The Fourth Stage,” Soyinka writes, “Yoruba myth syncretizes Obatala, god of purity, god also of creation, (but not of creativity) with the first deity, Orisan-la” (27). His avid interest in the world of mythology is also further elucidated in this essay. Soyinka not only makes prodigious use of myth and ritual in his creative works, particularly, in his poetry, but goes beyond just that. He moves on to place works on a global map. There is always an invocation and a retreat to the Yoruba gods; such as, Ogun, Sango, Atunda and others. For the purposes of this critical inquiry, myth is to be used in the sense that Northrop Frye (2000) has used it, as:

> The union of ritual and dream in a form of verbal communication…. The myth accounts for, and makes communicable, the ritual and the dream. Ritual, by itself, cannot account for itself: it is pre-logical, pre-verbal, and in a sense pre-human…. Myth, therefore, not only gives meaning to ritual and narrative to dream: it is the identification of ritual dream, in which the former is seen to be the latter in

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> movement…. Ritual is the archetypal aspect of ‘ mythos’ and dream, the archetypal aspect of ‘dianoia’ (96).

Odia Ofeimun (2014), in his *In Search of Ogun: Soyinka iN SPiTE OF NiETZSCHE,* insists that,

> The stories, as Soyinka has authenticated and audited them, whether from the standpoint of a creation myth in which Ogun is the path-maker who cleared the way from the gods to humankind, or the entrepreneur who brought the fire of civilization to lift humanity from barbarism, or the war-monger who protects the weak but could also devour them in sheer gore-mongering, was fascinating because of what he added to it (22).

Tenure Ojaide (1994) in his book, The Poetry of Wole Soyinka bemoans the paucity of criticisms on Soyinka’s poetry as against his works on other genres. Ojaide is of the opinion that “Soyinka is a gifted writer who holds opinions that should be heard. He may be regarded as a maverick highbrow poet who is difficult and obscure. When examined from the standpoints of voice and viewpoint, however, I believe that his poetry is quite accessible” (3).

A.M. Horcart (1973) argues in his book, *The life-giving myth and other essays*, that all human societies and organizations are myth-suffused and every myth is necessarily backed by rituals in the sense. In the same vein, Dan Sperber, in *Structuralism and Since: From Levi-Strauss to Derrida* is of the view that ‘most cultural phenomena, such as technology or political organization, must submit to a variety of ecological and sociological constraints. Again, myths, which are orally transmitted and culturally selected narratives, tend to ignore any determinations other than intellectual ones, and even these seem to remain relatively

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loose'(34). Hence, myths should provide an exceptional insight into the spontaneous working of the human mind.

Quoting Biodun Jeyifo, in *Research in African Literature*, Obi Maduakor (1971) observes that Soyinka's works have "an elaborate sub-structure of myth, ritual and symbolisms which transform them into 'haunting, apocalyptic creations of the imagination' (1:36). In another work of his, *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to his Writing*, Obi Maduakor (1991) argues that Soyinka has immortalized the energies of his god, Ogun, in *Idanre* and *Ogun Abibiman*. Ogun emerges as the revolutionary archetype. In *Idanre*, he is situated in the context of Yoruba mythology where he distinguished himself as the protagonist of the abyss and as both the hero and the monster at the Battle of Ire. In *Ogun Abibiman*, Ogun's mythic attributes are seen from a contemporary perspective. Samora Machel decides in 1976 to declare Mozambique at war with the white minority regime of former "Rhodesia" and sees Ogun as the warlord who is the Commander of the forces of all Abibiman. He is however assisted by his historical counterpart, the legendary Chaka, the Zulu warlord.

Soyinka focuses on the god, Ogun in most of his literary oeuvres. Quite early in his writings, he expresses the belief in Ogun as tutelary deity for great minds all over the worls. Ogun is easily differentiated from Obatala and Sango in the Yoruba pantheon. For Bolaji Idowu (1962), whereas Obatala is seen to represent a general placidity which is perceived to be the harmonious essence of creation, Ogun's factor is seen as more energetic. Soyinka believes that Obatala represents all the elements that make for harmony. In contrast, Ogun is seen as the embodiment of challenge and the hubristic impulse of the rebel. He is also the embodiment of creativity as opposed to creation. In relation to Sango, the two gods are differentiated in terms of the type of justice they represent. Whereas Sango's justice is primarily retributive, Ogun stands for a humane but rigidly restorative justice.

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Soyinka evokes the serenity of Obatala and the retributive justice of Sango, but avoids grounding his theory on the tragic potentials of either of the two gods. He mediates on a wide range of issues, ranging from the relations between ritual and drama to the personal and cultural correlatives necessary for success in a confusing and potentially tragic world (Garuba, 1992). Comparing Soyinka's use of the Ogun myth with the writings of early settlers in America, such as Frederick Jackson Turner, Garuba argues that the notion of a frontier which needs to be crossed or pushed back is a definitive topos of cultures defining their identities. The notion of the frontier, Garuba considers, significant to Soyinka as he mediates on the relationships between his culture's conceptual system and its place in the world. Unlike the American frontier, which was a physical one, the one Soyinka engages with is a spiritual one.

Several towns and dynasties attempt to link foundational narratives to Ogun as a means of political validation, so that even the tale associating Ogun with Ire is a manifestation of the political inflections of Ogun myths. In the "Ijala" chants, Ogun is defined as 'a man of the people,' 'a Robin Hood' or 'Aeneas,' living among ordinary people and suffering their tribulations with them (Garuba 1992).

Ofeimun argues again that "all the gods, quintessentially, function within what Nietzsche describes as the *chthonic realm*. He perceives Soyinka's fourth stage as a zone in mythic space, distinct from but encompassing the world of the living, the dead and unborn" (101). Biodun Jeyifo, opines that, so inexorable and hegemonic is the personage of Ogun at the heart of Soyinka's art that the search for the will of Ogun could indeed be viewed as the most logical means of hermeneutic access to his literary, philosophical and social vision.

Soyinka, in navigating the trajectories of his writings, not only re-writes the terms of Yoruba symbolism and mythology, but does so in a deftly expressed aesthetic and political

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ideology. He expresses this explicitly in defining the agenda of *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), "the simultaneous act of eliciting from history, mythology and literature, for the benefit of both genuine aliens and alienated Africans, a continuing process of self-apprehension." (Preface, xi).

Textual Analysis

Wole Soyinka, in his "Preface to Idanre", says that the inspiration for the poem, "Idanre," came as a result of a walk he took, in the middle of the night, amidst " presences such as dilate the head and erase known worlds" to the Idanre hills.

> We returned at dawn, the sun was rising just below the hut where we had sheltered on the outward journey. The palm wine girl still waited, the only other human being awake in the vast prescient night, yet an eternal presence whose charity had earthed me from the sublimating essence of the night…. I took my leave of her, my companions had vanished, I returned home wet from overladen boughs, brittle as the herald lightning to a storm. By nightfall that same day, *Idanre* was completed (*Idanre* 57).

The 'wine girl' is said to be Oya, the mythic wife of Ogun, and later, the wife of Sango, the god of lightning and electricity. On a superficial level, she is seen as a girl who was killed in a car accident (86).

In *Idanre*, Soyinka attempts to revive an ancient Yoruba legend which is at once the poem and also a metaphor for the Nigerian situation at the time. Implicit in Soyinka's metaphysics is that death has a positive value. Death, when it's consciously awaited, acts as a pivot that showcases the energetic creative impulse. This means that Soyinka portrays death and growth as opposite sides of the same coin. In "Abiku", the reader confronts the idea that

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"the ripest fruit was saddest." This is simply a metaphorical representation of the idea that life, at its fullest, is closest to death. It is basically an adaptation of the myth of the eternal return of the individual back to earth. Consequently, re-incarnation is a mythological theme that features in Soyinka's poetry. He incorporates the abyss into his cyclic conception of existence. His inclination towards the belief that the past informs the present emanates from his philosophy of life-death-life, or growth-decay-growth, or ripeness-rust-ripeness cycle.

Here, Ogun visits the earth in order to fertilize her, since he controls the seasons as god of harvest. On this particular visit, he is accompanied by his acolyte, the poet himself seeking creative inspiration. His other exploits in the context of Yoruba mythology are recounted in the course of the poem. The journey itself is a symbolic re-enactment of the god's passage through the abyss of transition. The abyss is a thick undergrowth of matter and non-matter that separates the realm of the gods from the abode of men (Maduakor, 1991). In the first stanza of the poem's opening section, "Deluge", the reader encounters:

Gone, and except for horsemen briefly
Thawed, lit in deep cloud mirrors, lost
The Skymen of Void's regenerate Wastes
Striding vast across
My still inchoate earth

Donatus Nwoga (1981), in his essay, "Poetry as Revelation: Wole Soyinka," asserts that, " the 'wisdom' which he finds, and what I think emerges from his poems and gives significance to them, is recognition of the cyclic nature of death and resurrection, of destruction and new creation. If then the situation is catastrophic and largely sad, the informed vision holds on to the promise of renewal" (1:183).

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Consequently, we also find the mythic cyclic nature of death, deftly captured by Soyinka, in the enigmatic poem, "Post Mortem." In this case, the metaphor of death transcends beyond the physical death, or extinction of life, but, to suffering in life and hardship. The protagonist urges the reader to "let us love all things of grey; grey slabs, grey scalpel, one grey sleep and form, grey images." (*Idanre*, 31). Grey colour also symbolizes imprisonment and incarceration.

Interestingly, in the poem, "Dawn", there are two apparent levels of meaning. The poem illustrates Soyinka's preoccupation with the destructive and creative potentials of the god, Ogun. Nwahunanya (2007) posits that the poem is indicative of the painful and destructive nature of creation, and the paradox that destruction is a necessary preliminary to creation. He further asserts that,

> It is known that the palm tree is a phallic symbol of Ogun; palm fronds too look in outline like the sun and are collectively associated with the coming of Ogun. When we realize that the silhouette of a palm tree's crown resembles the sun in shape, and that the sun occupies a majestic position in the solar system, the comparison between Ogun's majesty, the sun's majesty, the palm tree's majesty in the midst of other trees, and the poet's majestic position among men slowly emerges. But one needs the mythological background of associations in Yoruba belief to unravel this (85).

In the poem, "Death in the Dawn," one comes across "may you never walk when the road is famished." This may appear superficial and ordinary, unless the reader knows that Ogun is the custodian god of the road. On a physical level, the road lies famished, waiting for unfortunate travelers, but, mythically, it is indeed, Ogun, who waits famished. The myth and ritual deployed by the use of gods, gives depth and substance to Soyinka's works. It is however in *Idanre*, that he gives a most vivid image of Ogun. The poem is replete with

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translations of the original Yoruba myth. This line is quite remarkable: "Ogun path-maker, he who goes fore where other gods have turned." (*Idanre*, 72).

The above line is based on the myth of creation. It relates to the story of the time when the gods were coming from heaven. They could not get a clear path into the world and when they could have lost all hopes, Ogun came and created a path for them. However, the image of Ogun presented in *Idanre* is that of a cruel, bloody, and bitter god, who,

> with wretches of last year's supper
> paved his roads with shells, mile-
> stones of breathless bones.
> Ogun is a demanding god (82)

Ogun must certainly be a demanding god. He takes sacrifices of both men and dogs on a regular basis. If he fails to get his usual sacrifices, he retaliates in a very terrible way; by exacting stiff penalties. The delineation of Ogun as a blood thirsty god is quite in consistence with the belief of his worshippers and with the myths surrounding him.

Ogun is the god of war. The protagonist describes vividly in *Idanre*, how the elders of Ire went to beg Ogun to be their king. After "clearing a path to man," he was made a king of deities:

> His task was ended, he declined the crown
> of deities, sought retreat in the height
> but Ire laid siege to divine withdrawal
> alas for diplomatic arts, the elders of Ire
> prevailed; He descended and they
> crowned him king (71).

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Ogun led his men to war and it was a very brilliant outing. He fought rather gallantly. The people of Ire, the children of Ogun, "reaped red earth that harvest" (71). His attire for the event is not left out in the narration. The speaker does not hide the faults of Ogun, in spite of the fact that he constantly refers to Ogun as "my god Ogun." While presenting the picture of how Ogun went to war, the speaker says,

> Ogun is the lascivious god who takes seven
> Gourdlets to war: one for gun-powder, one for
> Charms, two for palm wine and three air-sealed in
> Polished bronze make storage for his sperms (72).

In his blood-lust, we find Ogun slaying his own men. He was obviously drunk, and did not realize his atrocious behaviour. Consequently, the people cried, "Your men, Ogun! Your men," but he was deaf. Still they cried, "Lust-blind god, gone drunk. Hunter monster-deity, you destroy your men!"

These are all perceptions of the traditional mythology of the Yoruba people. Soyinka has indeed brought life to the mythology of his people. He has indeed immortalized Ogun in the hearts of his readers. Bolaji Idowu (1962) asserts that, "Ogun, reckless and ferocious, opted for an isolated life on the hill (Ori-Oke). At last he decided to live among the community" (1:140). In *Idanre and Other Poems*, there is a list of the deities formed by the wiles of Atunda. Soyinka explains that Atunda was the slave of the highest deity. The deity's name, which the reader first encounters,explains his place in the mythology of the Yoruba. Atunda, which means re-creator, was said to be responsible for the multiple god-head. Part of the deities formed are: "Orisanla, Orunmila, Esu, Ifa" (*Idanre*, 70).

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In the poem, "Abiku," we find the myth of eternal return. This is a poem based on the myth of the changeling child. The delineation of this mythology in the writing of the poem is very remarkable and depicts the whole essence of the poem. The speaker goes on:

> In vain your bangles cast
> Charmed circles at my feet
> I am Abiku, calling for the first
> And the repeated time
>
> Must I weep for goats and cowries
> For palm oil and the sprinkled ash?
> Yams do not sprout in amulets
> To earth Abiku's limbs
>
> Once and the repeated time, ageless
> Though I puke, and when you pour
> Libations, each finger points near
> The way I came (28-29).

This Abiku is a very tough and defiant, and mocks at the efforts of the parents to retain him. Here, the abiku is very much unlike J. P. Clark's abiku. This abiku taunts and torments the parents, to the utmost chagrin of all. The myth surrounding the abiku phenomenon is that abiku is a child born to die. He is believed to be a member of a fraternity of evil spirits, which are re-cycled in a constant cycle of birth-death-rebirth. This particular myth is upheld in many parts of Nigeria, and indeed, Africa. In Igbo mythology, it is known as Ogbanje.

The symbolic performance in "Abiku" is seen where the parents of the changeling child offer sacrifices of palm oil, cowries, akara balls, goats, coconuts, and many other items

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to the other members believed to be living in the water, to let abiku stay with her family in this particular sojourn on earth. In defiance, abiku says,

> Brand me
> Deeply on the breast – you must know him when Abiku calls
> Again
> I am the squirrel teeth, cracked
> The riddle of the palm; remember
> This, and dig me deeper still into
> The god's swollen foot
>
> The ripest fruit was saddest;
> Where I crept, the warmth was cloying.
> In silence of webs, Abiku moans, shaping
> Mounds from the yolk (29-30).

Conclusion

Soyinka deploys the technique of symbolism in moving from the particular to universal. He portrays the realities of his experience through the use of images and symbols. Daniger and Johnson (1966) note that the use of the symbolic method "can suggest general human experiences in a concrete form. The writer can appeal to ideas and emotions of which the reader is not fully conscious"(32). "Death in the Dawn", could have been just another poem on accidents, but for the metaphorical inclination. To this extent, the poem, consequently takes on the air of the universal in the masterful strokes of Soyinka. For Soyinka, Ogun had become a twentieth Century deity, who superintended not only over iron foundries that gave rise to modern civilization but other scientific pursuits, beyond metallurgy, in electricity, electronics and related feats. (Ofeimun 2014). In his poetry, Soyinka appropriates Yoruba traditional imageries and symbolism, and transforms them into

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haunting apocalyptic paradigms of universal truth. He manipulates the elements of symbolism to suit his convenience and purpose. In the dynamics of his literary oeuvre, Soyinka succeeds in moving his poetry beyond the mere rhetoric of mythos, and transcending it to a global phenomenon.

What Anthony Obaje (2018) says of Achebe's poetry is also applicable to Soyinka's poetry. He says that "the poet, as a historian and a psychologist who understands his people very well, presents poems of social and spiritual regeneration" (97). This is as true in the metaphysics of Chinua Achebe's *Beware Soul Brother*, as it is in the convolutions and mythos of the corpus of the poetry of Wole Soyinka. Like Soyinka himself infers, in his book, *Power, Hydropus and Other Toxic Mutations*, "whoever calls himself or herself a trained historian, invokes the possession of forensic skills, and with all the intellectual responsibility that such a calling demands" (2013:174). The thesis I posit is that Soyinka's poetry is neither difficult nor obscure. It is rather a rich resource of symbolism and myth, and in effect, very rewarding to study.

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