

Original Research Article

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

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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 Soyinka'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.

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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.

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Symbolism is a major feature in the poetry of Wole Soyinka. Consequently, just as he says of Okigbo's poetry, Dan Izevbye 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

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

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

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

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).

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

78 Quoting Biodun Jeyifo, in *Research in African Literature*, Obi Maduakor (1971)
79 observes that Soyinka's works have "an elaborate sub-structure of myth, ritual and
80 symbolisms which transform them into 'haunting, apocalyptic creations of the imagination'
81 (1:36). In another work of his, *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to his Writing*, Obi Maduakor
82 (1991) argues that Soyinka has immortalized the energies of his god, Ogun, in *Idanre* and
83 *Ogun Abibiman*. Ogun emerges as the revolutionary archetype. In *Idanre*, he is situated in the
84 context of Yoruba mythology where he distinguished himself as the protagonist of the abyss
85 and as both the hero and the monster at the Battle of Ire. In *Ogun Abibiman*, Ogun's mythic
86 attributes are seen from a contemporary perspective. Samora Machel decides in 1976 to
87 declare Mozambique at war with the white minority regime of former "Rhodesia" and sees
88 Ogun as the warlord who is the Commander of the forces of all Abibiman. He is however
89 assisted by his historical counterpart, the legendary Chaka, the Zulu warlord.

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

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

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

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

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

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

128 **Textual Analysis**

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

132 We returned at dawn, the sun was rising just below the hut where we had sheltered on
 133 the outward journey. The palm wine girl still waited, the only other human being
 134 awake in the vast prescient night, yet an eternal presence whose charity had earthed
 135 me from the sublimating essence of the night.... I took my leave of her, my
 136 companions had vanished, I returned home wet from overlaiden boughs, brittle as the
 137 herald lightning to a storm. By nightfall that same day, *Idanre* was completed (*Idanre*
 138 57).

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

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

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

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

160 Gone, and except for horsemen briefly
 161 Thawed, lit in deep cloud mirrors, lost
 162 The Skymen of Void’s regenerate Wastes
 163 Striding vast across
 164 My still inchoate earth
 165

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

201 with wretches of last year’s supper
202 paved his roads with shells, mile-
203 stones of breathless bones.
204 Ogun is a demanding god (82)

205
206 Ogun must certainly be a demanding god. He takes sacrifices of both men and dogs on a
207 regular basis. If he fails to get his usual sacrifices, he retaliates in a very terrible way; by
208 exacting stiff penalties. The delineation of Ogun as a blood thirsty god is quite in consistence
209 with the belief of his worshippers and with the myths surrounding him.

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

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

219

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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).

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

246 In vain your bangles cast
 247 Charmed circles at my feet
 248 I am Abiku, calling for the first
 249 And the repeated time
 250
 251 Must I weep for goats and cowries
 252 For palm oil and the sprinkled ash?
 253 Yams do not sprout in amulets
 254 To earth Abiku’s limbs
 255
 256 Once and the repeated time, ageless
 257 Though I puke, and when you pour
 258 Libations, each finger points near
 259 The way I came (28-29).
 260

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

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

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

Comment [GB15]: Abiku but not abiku

271 Brand me
 272 Deeply on the breast – you must know him when Abiku calls
 273 Again
 274 I am the squirrel teeth, cracked
 275 The riddle of the palm; remember
 276 This, and dig me deeper still into
 277 The god’s swollen foot
 278
 279 The ripest fruit was saddest;
 280 Where I crept, the warmth was cloying.
 281 In silence of webs, Abiku moans, shaping
 282 Mounds from the yolk (29-30).

283 Conclusion

284 Soyinka deploys the technique of symbolism in moving from the particular to
 285 universal. He portrays the realities of his experience through the use of images and symbols.
 286 Daniger and Johnson (1966) note that the use of the symbolic method “can suggest general
 287 human experiences in a concrete form. The writer can appeal to ideas and emotions of which
 288 the reader is not fully conscious”(32). “Death in the Dawn”, **could have been just another**
 289 **poem on accidents, but for the metaphorical inclination.** To this extent, the poem,
 290 consequently takes on the air of the universal in the masterful strokes of Soyinka. For
 291 Soyinka, Ogun had become a twentieth Century deity, who superintended not only over iron
 292 foundries that gave rise to modern civilization but other scientific pursuits, beyond
 293 metallurgy, in electricity, electronics and related feats. **(Ofeimun 2014).** In his poetry,
 294 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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Comment [GB20]: Should by and large abide the referencing style recommended by the journal

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