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DEVALUATION AESTHETICS IN SOYINKA'S REQUIEM FOR A FUTUROLOGIST

by

Gbemisola Remi Adeoti

Introduction

QUITE a great deal, one is aware, has been written on Wole Soyinka's satiric corpus. (Jones 1973; Gibbs 1986; Iji 1991; Lindfors 1993 among others). Many more would still have to be written because like other great writings, Soyinka's works are such that rarely court exhaustive and decisive interpretations. It is observable from many available studies dealing with Soyinka's satire that not much attention has been given to the formal and constitutive elements of this literary mode. They are either ignored or accorded little significance.

The result is usually an exposition of the playwright's thematic preoccupation, leaving out in the process his tools of creation. Patrick Ebewo's essay, "Dwarfing the Giants: Political Satire in Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*" (1993, 80-92) sufficiently exemplifies this perceived hiatus. Though illuminating, Ebewo's analysis is vitiated by its restrictive fascination by and concentration on the play's political concern. The mechanics of "dwarfing the giants" are in the main ignored.

Regardless of the immediate object of discourse, cultivating a clearer perception of a literary work is usually the mainspring of criticism. This is better demonstrated not through mere identification of the work's subject-matter, but via a firm grasp and illumination of its generic/modal constituents deployed by the writer into the creation of an artistic whole. The potentials of a drama are likely to be more realized if the critic goes beyond the territory of "What" into the sometimes arduous province of "How". This paper therefore intends to examine the technical elements of satire adopted by the playwright in *Requiem for a Futurologist* in pursuing his goal of painting a demeaning portrait of the practice, practitioners and clients of futurology in contemporary Nigeria.

THE STRATEGIES OF SATIRE

Theorizing on the filiation between the artist and the society in Africa, Soyinka observes that "the artist has always functioned as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time." (1988, 20). Expectedly, from one writing to the other, he (Soyinka) strives to accommodate such social imperatives. He is committed to the creation of a new, just and hu-

mane social order in place of the execrable status quo. Satire is frequently used in that attempt to reform the society. To him, the schema of social reformation or change involves a sufficient knowledge of the present inadequacies and their subsequent demolition. Satire assists in that direction because it has as its established end, the digging up and criticism of improprieties, wherever they are found in the social strata, through laughter. Thus, humour or laughter and an object of attack are indispensable to satire. (Fyre, 1957, 224).

To achieve the goal of demolition of his target, the satirist paints a distorted picture. The distortion may be in form of blowing out of proportion the person(s) and vice(s) involved or presenting an under-valuated image. Whichever option is adopted, the victim of satire earns less respect from the audience than he or she used to have.

This scheme is what we call "aesthetics of devaluation". It involves a conscious belittling of the "great and mighty" as in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Soyinka's *A Play of Giants and Opera Wonyosi*. On another level, it may entail a deliberate magnifying of the "trivial and inconsequential" as in John Dryden's *MacFlecknoe*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Soyinka's *Requiem*. The possibilities intersect at a devalued version of actuality, which is amusing and simultaneously disgusting.

It is worthwhile to remark that the satirist avoids a photographic reproduction of reality. But even while distanced from reality, the product encapsulates sufficient truth from which he can proceed to launch his attack on the target. He has at his disposal a variety of literary/rhetorical devices like irony (presenting the opposite of the overt meaning); parody (an imitation which through distortion provokes amusement and sometimes scorn); Burlesque (incongruous imitation); caricature (ludicrous distortion of outstanding features); travesty (a deliberate deflation of original characteristics); the grotesque (a distortion which coheres the ludicrous and monstrous, the mocking and the terrifying) and hoax (a deliberate lie told to deceive or swindle).

Nonetheless, besides the foregoing, drama and theatre still hold more. Setting and decor, costume, make-up, mannerism and histrionics of characters can be used by playwright-artist. The dialogue in such a play can be lined with hyperbole, meiosis, metaphor, pun, paradox, proverb, epigram and symbolism to communicate ridicule. Let us now examine how Soyinka coheres some of these devices in articulating his aesthetics of devaluation in *Requiem*. It must be noted however that we may not be able to deal exhaustively with "aesthetics" as a philosophical discipline here. We are constrained by space. Our usage of it, however, shall be restricted to its signification as the principle of beauty, its creation and cognition in a work of art. (Holman, 1972, 6-7).

Derisive death in requiem

From the terrain of despots and their excesses depicted in *Kongi's Harvest*, *Madmen and Specialists*, *Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of Giants*, *Requiem* returns us to another familiar landscape in Soyinka's theatre inhabited by charlatans and their gullible victims as depicted in *The Jero Plays*. According to Soyinka, it is a completion of a "trilogy of transition" preceded by *The Road and Death and the King's Horseman*. But characteristic of *Requiem* is the association of death largely with ludicrous flippancy.

Written against the backdrop of the 1983 General Elections in Nigeria, the play is a frontal attack on the phenomenon of commercialized crystal-gazing, futurology, astrology, metaphysics, occultism, palm-reading etc. Censured here are not only the practitioners of these arts, but also their patrons who readily embrace any claim to prescience with little or no effort to sieve fact from falsehood and reality from illusion.

Soyinka anchors his satire in the play in a celebrated hoax which Jonathan Swift foisted on John Patridge the 18th century English cobbler turned astrologer. Swift, writing under the name Isaac Bickerstaff, checkmated Patridge with his own style (Highet, 1972, 98-99).

Soyinka's outrage against the futurologist stems from the observation that apart from sounding commonplace to a discerning mind, most of their forecasts are hazy and unspecific. What he also finds abhorrent is that some of them build up followership simply by predicting "fictitious" disasters which can only be averted if the futurologist's biddings are done. The play opens and ends on a note of reversed reality in which the biter gets bitten and the fox out-foxed. Revd Godspoke who always forecasts people's misfortunes or death has his own death too predicted. Curiously, the predictor in this case is not just interested in predicting, he takes a step further to pursue its fulfilment. What is largely false is therefore rendered as the authentic.

Since jolting the audience out of its habitual ways of perceiving reality is a basic feature of every satire, an ironic inversion identified above underlines the structure of *Requiem*. It sets out with a patent illogicality or absurdity - a man compelled to prove that he is alive when the entire society insists that he is "as dead as a doornail". The playwright builds systematically upon this until a more confounding absurdity is arrived at at the end - a living man willingly lying - in - state, feigning death, with avid mourners filing past him in condolence.

Irony wields a notable influence in the creation of a reality astray in the play. This is evident in the characters of the Revd. Dr. Godspoke Igbehodan and the crowd, both marked out for devaluation. From the onset, the audience is introduced to a tormented Reverend whose molestation in the hands of the rabble gradually elicits the violence in him. He deviates from the normal conduct ex-

pected of a cleric, as he picks up a cutlass to attack his tormentors. The irony gains more weight when a supposed Christian "whips out a cutlass" and insists that Alaba should swear on it - a practice commonly associated with the believers of Ogun — Yoruba god of Iron. Soyinka intensifies the achieved incongruity later when Godspoke agrees to turn the table of wished death against Eleazar by lying to Singh that Eleazar has died in a motor accident. Such an undignifying dishonesty re-emphasizes the fact that the stock-in-trade of futurologists is falsehood. If Godspoke is truly prescient, he ought to have foreseen Eleazar's pranks.

Like Prophet Jeroboam, his predecessor in deceit, Godspoke is a coxcomb who believes that appearance is significant in the commercial enterprise of foretelling. Hence, the secret of his success lies in the maintenance of an elegant wardrobe which according to him is "A simple business investment ---. To attract the right clientele, one must invest in appearances." (Soyinka, 1985, 37). Nonetheless, a "pious fop" created in him is least deserving of any awe via irony. Godspoke's type of "death", rather than evoking the customary empathy in the audience, brings about derision. What can be regarded as "dignity in death" in the tradition of Aristotelian hero is replaced with a picture of a caricatured hero. His lying-in-state, an example of devaluation, is merely a symbolic affirmation of his occultic impotence and denial of any claim to reverence.

The crowd too is an embodiment of contradictions. Its foible is conveyed through the irony manifest in its readiness to renounce a belief-not in itself the truth only to embrace that which is diametrically illogical and unfounded. This makes it vulnerable to futurologists whom Soyinka labels as "Exploiters of human susceptibilities and insecurities" (1983, 11).

In the context of the play, truth becomes a problematized concept. What is particularly remarkable is that for the naive crowd, truth is not necessarily an objective but a subjective phenomenon, largely defined by personal desires and wishes. Truth is therefore inconstant and mercurial. The paradox, however, is that the trend of the crowd's thought is presented as being predictable even in its inconsistency. The crowd's opinion may be changeable in the abstract, yet, it is cloaked in "permanence", judging from its unbending position on Godspoke's "death". This paradox is important in any consideration of the playwright's manner of ridiculing gullibility in the play.

Abundantly present in the mob is what Henri Bergson calls "lack of suppleness through inattention or inflexibility" (1974, 738). And through that, the mob contributes amusement to Soyinka's criticism. Absurdity lies in its refusal to believe, despite all empirical persuasion that Godspoke is still alive. It rather prefers to interpret every situation or event as supportive of its mono-focal conclusion. For instance, some characters insistently speak of Godspoke in past tense or in inanimate third person singular pronoun "It" to affirm his death. Falsehood is not in itself ridiculous until it is parading or being paraded as the utmost truth as we have here. If we cast aside their collective limitations, however, the crowd's

spokesmen through their hostility expose Godspoke in his true colour. They deride his predictions. In the words of 2nd Man who often articulates Soyinka's scepticism, "when you look closely at it, he [Godspoke] never predicted anybody's death. Not by name. Never by name..." (15).

As the agent of Soyinka's satire, the use of deceit to denigrate deceit is pivoted on Alaba/Semuwe/Eliazar triad. Taking Eliazar to represent the three, he can be seen as a satirist, the tortoise archetype who through his schemings draws his enemies to their shame.

The use of a "hunch" to disguise Alaba is quite deliberate. Apart from being an easy theatrical device of simulation, the hunchback is a stereotypical character whose bodily deformity is explored in many traditions of comedy, both local and foreign. The hunch inherently lends amusement to whatever weakness of Godspoke he is out to reveal.

The inscription of "I HAVE FOUND IT" on the placard carried by Alaba at the beginning is significant. Used as a subterfuge to wade through the hostile mob, it is a stogy foretaste of the deception that is to follow in the play. "I HAVE FOUND IT" is also a telling proclamation by the satirist (Soyinka represented by Alaba) that he has detected the tricks of Nigerian astrologers. By implication, the audience should now sit back and watch their devaluation. When Alaba shortly after cozens "inducement fee" out of Godspoke as Semuwe's consultation fee, he makes the futurologist pay heavily but willingly for a medical examination and treatment that are overtly irrelevant to his misery. Through his hoax, the thief is safely robbed, thus, demonstrating the sometimes vindictive motive of satire.

Though Soyinka gives an impression of his close affinity with Alaba/Semuwe/Eliazar triad, the necessary artistic distance between the playwright and his creation is still recognizable. While Soyinka does not leave his own audience without effecting a change of attitude in them towards the futurologists, making them wiser, Eliazar leaves the crowd (his own audience) more foolish and naive than it is at the beginning. This is evident in his peroration as Semuwe: "...Their procession here was all pre-ordered and pre-ordained. Everything is under control" (56).

From the downfall of Godspoke, he emerges as the King among astrologers. His resplendent magnification and transfiguration is therefore a perpetuation of the crowd's folly. Although it has got rid of a fake, the crowd's gullibility still makes the environment conducive to the emergence of a worse sham.

Through the scenic arrangement, Soyinka effects a proper isolation of his satiric butts. The action steadily alternates between the upper level where Godspoke is confined (only joined by Alaba/Semuwe/Eliazar) and the lower level where the crowd is restrained. Until the denouement when the conflict between these two categories of Eliazar's victims is resolved, the interaction between the two levels is characterized by hostility. Movement from one to the other is much impaired. Separating Godspoke from the crowd below and by extension the audience is

practical theatrical necessity. He and what he represents are made more visible to the audience, i.e. charlatanism. Besides, being above the mob signifies the superiority of his intellect to his clients' thus, placing him at a vantage point to gull them for long.

Alternating the actions between Godspoke's room upstairs and the ground facilitates the exploration of dramatic irony to portray the amusing discrepancy between reality and the characters' opinions. What transpires at both levels is deceit. Though spatially separated, Godspoke and the crowd are united in their ignorance of the fact that their actions are not voluntary. Rather, they are being manipulated insidiously by Eliazar. Be that as it may, deceit as a weapon of ridiculing deceit is borne out by the play's dialogue which thrives on the "deliberate doubling of meaning." (Mike, 1986, 33). Contradiction, ambiguity and pun scattered all through the dialogue contribute to the problematization of Godspoke's existence.

In his state of mental confusion, Godspoke often stutters. He is already deserted by the persuasive power of language. Incapable of articulating himself smoothly and convincingly, he resorts to physical violence and verbal aggression on his tormentors. He calls them "reptiles", "green snakes", "worms", "swines", "gullible fools" and "mindless mob". In a way, even imprecations from a supposed clergy is a clear example of incongruity adding to the air of his unreality. In another vein, incongruous linguistic possibilities from Godspoke strengthen the crowd's belief about his death and lower him in the audience's expectation. Curses are quite remote from the diction expected from a living Godspoke and by extension, a genuine cleric. This is supported by Kilanko and tailor: "Oh, for a moment I thought it was the dead man himself speaking. But I know he would never descend to such language" (10.). One encounters contradiction and ambiguity in both Godspoke and the crowd. The latter's conversation is marked by a vacillation between consensus and disagreement. At a point, its spokesmen are in perfect agreement, a while later, they contradict each other. Interestingly, they state their position in a matter-of-fact manner even when wrong.

2nd WOMAN: He's only pretending

KILONKO Pretending? Why should he do that?

He's a grown-up man, a responsible citizen.

Why should he try and fool everyone into thinking he's dead?

1ST WOMAN: He's not pretending to be dead, you nit.

He's pretending to be alive. (11).

To the audience, this absurd tendency can be described as mere "certainty in dubiety".

One clear example of dramatic irony which is used to elicit the audience's contempt is the crowd's unpreparedness to admit its gullibility.

- 1st MAN We are no fools and we haven't been kept waiting all these days for nothing.
- 2nd MAN At first, I wasn't too sure myself, but now I can sense there is a conspiracy afoot! We scorpions don't get fooled a second time...(17).

Simply put, this is an affirmation of the direct opposite of actuality, made more significant by the fact that what immediately follows their assertion is a session of deception which sees Eleazar (posing as Dr. Semuwe) going in to meet Godspcak.

In alternating the action between Upper and Lower levels, Soyinka juxtaposes the uninformed, everyday diction of the crowd with the formalized, disputatious, syllogistic and learned diction of Semuwe (in engaging Godspcak). While the former exhibits ignorance, the later portrays erudition, hence, his ability to overwhelm and deceive the crowd. However, it is unmistakable that the two possibilities conjoin at their devaluation.

The 'medical' probing of Godspcak by Semuwe is reminiscent of Socrates' philosophical disputations, often conducted in the form of dialogue. In Socrates' argument, what seems obviously simple is proved to be problematic and complex. The premises which may appear strong and weighty initially are in the course of the dialogue shown to be frail. Usually playing the fool or feigning ignorance, Socrates would ask his opponent certain questions and in the process of answering them, the absurdity of the opponent's claim or position comes to the fore. This socratic archetype manifests in the Godspcak/Semuwe duologue. Exhibiting feigned ignorance and genuine knowledge, Semuwe gradually conducts Godspcak through an investigation to purge him of resistance.

GODSPEAK:(Groaning) I am lost. I am done for. Finished.

SEMUWE: Good. We are making progress. I told you I have my methods... A moment ago you were so certain you were alive, now you admit you are lost, soon you will acquire the confidence to question your very existence. (27).

Semuwe realizes his goal shortly, for having been worn to a frazzle, Godspcak inadvertently announces: "Oh God! I am dead" (28). Thus, the Socratic idiosyncrasy reinforces this devaluation of Godspcak. It should however be mentioned that Soyinka stands the Socrates' method on its head. In the play, it is Socrates (Semuwe) himself who is basking in absurdity rather than his opponent. It is certain to the audience that in spite of his agreement to lie-in-state as advised by Semuwe, Godspcak is not dead.

Of relevance to the creation of an aura of uncertainty or ambiguity is the use of pun. Example:

GODSPEAK: ...You are lying in your teeth.

ELEAZAR: You are lying, Brother Godspcak, lying dead, lying dead, dead...(39).

Such a device of 'dual meaning' makes it possible for the characters to be saying the same thing, yet targeting disparate meanings. It enables the satirist too to be working at two levels of meaning; the textual which focuses the futurologists and the extra-textual which criticizes Shagari's government.

If satire is basically a lively flow of humour combined with cogent criticism it is partly exemplified in Kilanko and Master Carpenter. Their imploratory and persuasive diction, in the tradition of advertisers, smacks of a trifling treatment of death. The former, disappointed that Godspcak is not ready to claim his burial suit, remarks:

...You wouldn't be trying to do a man out of his legitimate payment, would you? The suit is already cut, all that is left is to fit you. And I used expensive material, the very best (12).

It is in a similar vein that we can construe the grotesque in Master Carpenter's attempt to eulogize the aesthetics of his product the coffin.

The interior is luxurious, your only chance perhaps to feel the touch of velvet all your life. With it, you understand eternal rest (29).

These imply that everything including death in the country can be commodified and made attractive, given the necessary eloquence and a credulous public.

Conclusion Remarks

Our central concern in this paper has been the examination of satiric devices like irony, the grotesque, hoax, caricature, incongruity, humour among others employed in *Requiem* to articulate Soyinka's chosen goal of demeaning futurologists. But besides, this, we also examine how theatrical elements like scenery and dialogue contribute to the articulation of his satiric intent: a calculated disfigurement or devaluation of foretelling, its practitioners and their customers in Nigeria. Coalescing the above formal properties the play shows that futurology in the country is distinguished by shamming and profiteering and sustained by a largely

superstitious populace. The picture that emerges is bitter, critical and contemptuous and yet it is amusing. It is hoped that future studies will probe further into the aesthetic strategies of satire in the play. Such an effort is likely to be more rewarding even if only in terms of creating an enhanced perception of the text.

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