



WOLE SOYINKA'S 'JERO'S METAMORPHOSIS': A SATIRICAL ATTACK ON RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

Soyinka drew on long tradition in literature of a lovable rogue, the character who repeatedly cheats and schemes to his own advantage, with wit and verve. In his 'Jero's Metamorphosis', Soyinka's protagonist is a representative of the same tradition who exploits the gullible to fulfill his quest for money and power in all respects. Jero's Metamorphosis is a light satiric comedy that takes aim at religious hypocrisy in the form of Charlton or fraud, named Brother Jero, who preaches to his followers on Bar Beach in Lagos, Nigeria. Jero is a master of manipulation and keeps his followers in a subservient position because he understands what they long for—money, social status and power and convinces them that they will soon be able to fulfill these material desires. In review from Time Magazine a critic describes the play as, "a broad spot of religious humbug, a con man of prophecy who lives by mulcting his worshipers or 'customers'." Soyinka served the role of a social reformer through his writing and for this he uses satire as a literary tool in an effective manner.

Present research paper reveals satirical remarks on contemporary religious institutions, religious persons and their religious practices in order to expose prevailing social conditions in accordance with drama 'Jero's Metamorphosis'. The paper also discusses as a Satirist how Soyinka attacks the evils of religious institutions and exposes the petty motives of the prophets.

Key-words: Religious Satire, Hypocrisy, Quest for Power, Superficial Prophets, Superficial Brotherhood

I. Introduction

Wole Soyinka is a Nigerian playwright poet and essayist. He was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in literature, the first African to be honored in that category. His intellectual and creative contributions to humanity have earned him worldwide respect. He was described as "one who in a wide cultural perspective and poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence". His writing is rooted in Yoruba

culture and Western traditions i.e. from Aristophanes to modern writers. His satires do not only concentrate on Yoruba or Nigerian setting and subject matter but also extend to embrace other parts of Africa. No doubt he is a big critic of his own men and manners. At the same time he is not an armchair critic but an activist and pragmatist. He is often seen demonstrating practically even to the extent of exposing his own life to imminent dangers. Hence he is regarded as a fighter for the people's

freedom. In line with Martin Luther King's philosophy of "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere", he anchors himself firmly in the belief that, "Justice is the first condition of humanity."

II. Soyinka as a Satirist

The drama has provided a favorable environment for satire ever since it was cultivated by Aristophanes. Aristophanes worked under extraordinarily conditions of 5th century Athenes. Through his series of plays Aristophanes attacked Athenian war policy, gullible complacency and lashed out at contemporary evils. Soyinka was highly influenced by Aristophanes. He practiced satire as a medium of lashing out the imprudence prevailing in the contemporary society with a zeal to bring reformation. As a Satirist Soyinka is seen fighting against the oppressions and injustices. He is prepared to uncover and lash at all sorts of evil and strange conventions which he despised. In his satires, Soyinka aims at exposing the meanness and drabness of the African life he sees around him. He observes the corruption and absurdities in social, political, sexual or religious life with great concerns. He is not a pessimistic writer. Like a true satirist 'he hates the sin and not the sinner' He is more of a philanthropist who likes people but hates their ignorance and foolishness. He wants to bring them out of the darkness and evils of ignorance. He directly attacks the age old conventions and vices which are being accepted and practiced blindly and thoughtlessly in the name of custom.

III. Satire in Jero's Metamorphosis

The larval-stage treatment of satire in Jero's characterization in *The Trials of Brother Jero* reaches the imago stage in *Jero's Metamorphosis* where right from the opening of the play the social status of Brother Jero has changed. Jero has transformed his base from the "rent troubled shack of The Trials", to "a decent modest whitewashed room, quite comfortable.... On the wall, a large framed picture of a uniformed figure at a battery of microphones indicates that Jero's diocese is no longer governed by his old friends the civilian politicians". The "uniformed figure" is obviously Brother Jero himself, and all the descriptions seem

to suggest how lucrative the "business" has become. The allusion to the contemporary Nigerian politics is apparent enough; in fact, it is to become more explicatory by the reference to the public execution of armed robbers mentioned in the play. As a matter of fact, the public execution of robbers is the basis of the conflict in the play.

In order to enhance tourism in the country, the authorities concerned have decided to build a National Public Execution Amphitheatre on the Bar Beach, a plan that entails the eradication of all religious sects that have been operating on the Beach. Only one group would be licensed to operate on the Beach.

The Salvation Army of which Brother Jero is the Leader, has been chosen for this function of spiritual monopoly, and Jero is thus bent on controlling rival sects. Femi Osofisan sees the choice of the Salvation Army as offering Jero great inspiration. With Brother Jero as the head, Soyinka, like in his *Kongi's Harvest*, points an angry finger at corrupt power and its attendant empty pomp and outward observances. This is evident in his Jero open search for an image that will befit the newly formed body, the Church of the Apostolic Salvation Army (CASA)

The basis of the confrontation between Jero and the other prophets on the beach. A signal of the brewing struggle is immediately given by Brother Jero in his opening dictation to Rebecca; "...in time of trouble it behoves us to come together, to forget old enmities and bury the hatchet in the head of a common enemy". This opening statement, as Jero himself later observes, "sounds a little unchristian". It immediately brings to mind the "prophets" territorial warfare hinted at earlier in *The Trials*. Where true people of God are, there is bound to be abundant peace. But Soyinka reveals that within the territory of these prophets the common talk is "trouble" "warfare", "violence", "common enemy", etc. There is a secret laugh enjoyed by the satirist as the superficial brotherhood and piety that have resulted in a cut-throat competition among the prophets amount to a dangerous parody of true religious observances. True religion preaches tolerance. Hermits apart,

religion is supposed to bring people together as children of one family having a common father. But Soyinka depicts these prophets as being far from meeting this onerous objective. Like the three brothers in the allegorical novel of Swift (*A Tale of a Tub*), who are meant to live together in peace, but, as they enter the world, they become more and more at odds with each other, Soyinka presents these prophets as fighters, not brother. The choice of *A Tale of a Tub* seems appropriate for a comparison since the allegory presents the career of the Christian church once it enters the world. The three brothers embody; Peter (the Church of Rome), Martin (Luther's moderate reforming Protestantism and the Church of England in Particular), and Jack (Calvinism). Fighting for the "Coat" which the father bequeathed to them upon his deathbed has a similarity to Jero and other prophets of the same Christian faith fighting for the Bar Beach. In fact in *The Trials of Brother Jero*, Soyinka hints that the misunderstanding between the prophets once reached such a scandalous height that the Town Council had to be drafted in to settle the differences. The intervention of the Town Council in religious disputes when the reverse should be the case, is the satirist's ridicule of the contemporary Nigerian situation where the struggle for power and high position in the church has resulted in frequent court cases.

IV. Attack on Religious Institution

In *Jero's Metamorphosis*, Brother Jero has really metamorphosed from his amateurish state of *The Trials* to a level where he now carries the Bible in one hand and a bowl of evil in the other, using each according to whim. Jero is depicted as a drunk. Like a frustrated husband who seeks an escape in alcohol, Jero's problem with the other prophets seems to result in his over indulgence in drinking. Rebecca reminds him. "Brother Jero, you promised..." but Jero answers: "Oh I didn't mean this half measure". To Jero, the business at hand is survival, and despite his holy disposition, he believes and says with a kind of libertine shamelessness that "To survive, we need full-bodied tactics". In contempt of his spiritual devotion, but in line with Chaucer's Prioress's concern with the things of the world, it is prophet Jero who says: "It seems to me

that in our upward look to heaven for a solution we have neglected what inspiration is afforded us below". To discover the said "tactics" and "inspiration", the satirist first presents us with a horde of criminals in the name of prophets: Ananias, Shadrach, Caleb, Isaac, Matthew, and the other Beach prophets. Jero gives us a clear picture of these so-called prophets.

The encounter between Ananias, one of the poorer specimens of the brotherhood and Brother Jero reveals some more details about the cunning nature of the prophets. Jero has just finished giving instructions to Rebecca on the preparation for the "spiritual assembly" which is to take place at eight. It is clear that Jero behaves like an actor. In such a swift business-like manner that sister Rebecca, according to stage directions, is left "coy, enraptured, confused and overwhelmed all at once". This is a practical demonstration of Jero's hypnotic grip on Rebecca's mind; and to ascertain if his trap has been properly set, we are told that "once outdoor Jero slips round the side and observes her [Rebecca] through a window. This is where and when Ananias catches him "What are you up to now Jero? Spying on your own little nest?". Though no meaningful answer is given to Ananias Question, Jero's utterance of "S -sh" is enough to convince us that he is not only a clever opportunist but a cunning spy. Later in the scene, it is disclosed that Brother Jero's claim in *The Trials of Brother Jero*, "I am a prophet. A prophet by birth and by inclination" is refuted by Ananias, one of the insiders who knows only too well that Jero has "no true vocation". This revelation forces Brother Jero to also expose the hidden fraudulent activities of Ananias. His (Ananias) only true concern, far from religion is for "just a living, nothing else", says Jero. Ananias himself regards the beach as a "land of milk and honey". Later in the scene, a dialogue between Jero and Ananias brings to the open other unholy activities of Ananias which hardly become the prophet.

V. Ridiculing the Prophets

The greatest revelation in the episode is not only Soyinka's exposure of the criminal activities of Ananias, but also his ridicule of the prophets abode

as a hide-out for daring criminals and hypocrites. Right after this episode, the emergence of the Chief Executive Officer of the Tourist Board of the City Council, followed by the clerk to the Board and a policewoman turns Soyinka's satirical shaft away from Ananias to sister Rebecca. Comparatively, sister Rebecca complements Brother Chume's character. She is presented as another victim of Brother Jero's scheming. Her reasoning faculty and imagination are completely arrested and controlled by the prophet. What remains of her is "spiritual ecstasy" and "convulsion" which have reached such alarming proportions that she is trembling from head to foot, flinging out her arms knocking off the glasses of the Executive Officer to the Council – all in the name of spiritualism, The Executive Officer calls her a "religious maniac". Wole Soyinka presents her as a fanatic of no mean order; she is body and soul trapped in a devotion she little understands. She regards Jero as another Christ on earth. She is so completely out of her senses that she ignorantly believes that "I was never more clearly within my senses as now". This statement is indeed a satirical irony as noticed the once intelligent young girl (Rebecca), a well-trained confidential secretary with eighty words per minute in typing and one hundred and twenty in shorthand abandon her well paid job to become a mere stooge to a cause of which she is only a victim. Soyinka laughs at Rebecca for permitting herself to be bamboozled by a fake prophet and transparent charlatan.

In Scene II of *Jero's Metamorphosis*, the playwright re-establishes the old relationship that existed between the victimized Chume and the cunning Jero. In fact, this helps to explain why Chume ran after Jero with a cutlass and goes further to give us Chume's estimation of Brother Jero's character – a further satirical portrayal of the cynical prophet. In this later encounter between Jero and Chume, the oppressed Chume wakes up this time from his deep psychological slumber and breaks out of the iron grip of the false prophet; a prophet who is so ungodly as to refuse to fellowship with Captain Winston because the latter is a whiteman. Chume declines brotherhood with Jero too, because as he explains in pidgin, "I no be your brother, no call me

your brother. De kin brother wey you fit be na the brotherhood of Cain and Abel. The brotherhood of Jacob and Esau". He proceeds to pour more scorn on Jero. "You be wayo [conman] man plain and simple. Wayoprophet!" Chume regrets not dealing with Jero when the opportunity availed itself. "If to say I get my cutlass inside your head that time this world for done become better place. They can hang me but I for become saint and martyr, I for die but de whole world go call me Saint Chume". Thoughts of the world rewarding and crowning the killer of Jero is Soyinka's proof that this prophet is worse than useless, and hence, should be eliminated from a well ordered society.

The frivolity and opportunism of all the beach prophets are derided by the satirist in the last scene of the play. The scene is the general meeting of all the prophets summoned by Brother Jero. As the scene opens in the front space of Brother Jero's headquarters, there is "loud chatter among a most bizarre collection of prophets", says the stage direction. The atmosphere at the meeting is not the serene and malleable type one would expect at a conference of godly men and women. As the scene progresses, Soyinka exposes yet many obnoxious qualities within the rank and file of the so-called prophets as Brother Jero returns to avail them with more drinks. Jero's action is not a display of generosity towards the other prophets. The logic behind his action is too obvious to be mistaken as he tells Rebecca: "Trust me, I know what I am doing". And soon after this, pandemonium prevails. Quarrelling rends the air as Ananias is found to be in an unauthorized possession of Shadrach's wallet. Brother Matthew and Isaac are engaged in a hot exchange of words: cowardice, frantic etc. This in fact, was the effect Jero wanted to achieve by having the prophets drunk. He needed them to fight over inconsequential while he, like Serjeant Musgrave in *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, the devout Christian, muddles up their reasoning and capitalizes on their weakness.

In the matter of which of the denominations should take control of the Beach, Shadrach wants his own sect - The Shadrach-Medrach-Abednego Apostolie Trinity. Notice should be taken of the satirist's ironic twist in his corrupt

application of the name "Trinity" to Shadrach's church. Shadrach's desire of course, clashes with Jero's who now takes control of the Beach and is honoured with the title "General" Shadrach and others are kicked out of the Beach as Jero assumes complete monopoly. For members of the audience who would want to undermine Jero's new title, "General Jero" justifies his rank by alluding to the fact that in his society, "It is the fashion these days to be a desk General".

VI. Conclusion

Jero's *Metamorphosis* was published in 1973, a time when the rule of Nigeria's Military Head, General Yakubu Gowon was waxing strong, this would lead to a better understanding of the essence of the satire on generalship, Osafisan states that *Jero's Metamorphosis*, besides its direct ridicule of the false prophets also mimics the antics of power. He concludes that in this play, the protagonist and his minions become a caricaturist symbol of the rising regimes of our continent. Soyinka's presentation though horrifying, compels us to laugh at the quality of this new leadership, the new Messiahs composed. As Shadrach says, of "thieves, robbers, rapists and cut-throats" motivated solely by self-interests and naked greed, and with an inherent callousness demonstrated in the plan to commercialize human executions. Soyinka exposes the bitter realities prevailing in the society and also throws light upon the fact that illiteracy and ignorance among the masses are the key factors behind such exploitations and suppressions.

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