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WOLE SOYINKA: A VOICE OF DARKNESS

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Abstract

Wole Soyinka, a true African and a Sub-Saharan writer, has raised his voice against undemocratic and inhuman activities through out his life. His literary works (poetry, prose and plays) reflect not only the political approaches but also reflect the sensibility of contemporary Sub-Saharan people, their culture, thoughts, ideas and philosophy. His activities in the literature, several lectures and interviews in different magazines, even in electronic media prove his internationalism rather than Nigerian nationalism; he is the voice of silent, voiceless and oppressed indigenous black people of Africa. He is the voice of darkness. In this article, my aim is to show how his literary works and career reflect his voice in favor of humanism, truth, justice and democracy.

Keywords: Humanism, Yoruba, Indigenous, Sub-Saharan, Religion, Sensitivity, Africanism

Introduction

Culturally, the people of African countries are indigenous and tribal. Still, even, in this technology based civilization, they prefer to live in a backward, polygamous clan based society. Although some countries are getting education, touch of modern technologies, touch of democracy and humanism, "Darkness" from this Dark Continent has not been fully removed. Wole Soyinka heartily tried to remove this darkness by his literary writings and acted himself as a giant torch, even, encountering and facing lots of torture and obstacles. His philosophy of literature superseded the boundaries of the Dark Continent. He has never tolerated the aggression of America and Soviet Union. He always tried to be vocal against western based culture. He has tried to establish the African sensibility as unique.

Wole Soyinka and Humanism: Lexically, humanism is "a system of thought that rejects religious beliefs and centers on humans and their values, capacities and worth" (*The American Heritage, Dictionary of the English language*, Fourth Edition, Copyright © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company). It emphasizes on the interests, needs, values and welfare of humans. Philosophically, "It refers to the denial of any power or moral value superior to that of humanity; the rejection of religion in favor of a belief in the advancement of humanity by its own efforts" (*Collins English Dictionary-Complete and Unabridged, 1991, 1994*, Happer Collins Publishers). It stresses the autonomy of human reason. During the renaissance periods, humanism was considered the main issue of cultural and intellectual movement which emphasized secular concerns as a consequence of re-birth of wisdom and study of the art, culture and literature of Grego-Roman

civilization. According to a pamphlet of A.H.A (American Humanist Association, established in 1941), "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity."

For Wole Soyinka, the main concern is the supremacy and authority of human being. Like the Greek philosopher, Protogoras, he thinks, "Man is the measure of all things, the things that are, that they are and the things that are not, that are not" (Mann, J.A and Kneyche, G.F, *Reflections on Man Readings in Philosophical Psychology from Classical Philosophy to Existentialism*, New York, Harcourt Brace and World. Inc, p7.

He strongly believes that if human dignity is signified, truth, justice, equality, all will be established. He also heartily believes that the rulers or authority of institutions must serve the purpose of man. This is the only ground on which we can trust on them.

In an interview, with Free Inquiry Magazine, he declared himself a humanist. "Humanism for me represents taking the human entity as the center of the world perception, of social organization and indeed of ethics, deciding in other words what is primarily of the greatest value for humans as opposed to some remote extraterrestrial or ideological authority. And so, that point of view, I consider myself a humanist" Free Inquiry, a *publication of Humanist International*, 1997, Fall Edition, p48).

Soyinka gives importance to human rights and freedom over the doctrine that knowledge, truth, and morality exist in relation to culture and society. In a word, he chose humanism in compare to relativism. He says, "We have to address those societies and states which either fail to recognize this, or elect to evoke entitlement of cultural relativism in order to undermine or dismiss the Universalist entitlement of human rights." He emphasizes the generous tolerance of Yoruba religious system. He believes that if we can pick out the wisdom from Ifa beliefs, we, of course will be able to improve our degenerated human condition

and also, it will help us (the people of the world) to build a strong communication between the religions. If we see the following paragraph Of Africa, we will understand his confidence regarding this:

"Our repositories of exclusive spiritual truths can learn from this ancient, unassuming faith of our forebears. Ifa is tolerance. Ifa takes issue with any religion or faith that denies tolerance a place in its worship. Ifa embodies the principle of the constant, spiritual quest, one to which the notion of apostasy is unthinkable...Tolerance is perhaps the most relevant, the most sorely in demand in our global dilemma...Tolerance, in its own right, is at the heart of Ifa, a virtue worth cultivating as a foundational principle of humanistic faith—the catechism of the secular deities, a spirit of accommodativeness" (Soyinka, *Of Africa*, p164-5).

Unlike the European, American and other Western sensitiveness, African is sensitive to his own Sub-Saharan culture, philosophy and thoughts. African sensitiveness considers the tangible qualities of matters which reflect the signs of extreme reality of human beings. Ontologically, this reality is the life force. "For the African, matter is only a system of signs which translates the single reality of the universe: being, which is spirit, which is life force" (Senghor, "*Negritude: Humanism of the Twentieth Century*," 197-8).

Soyinka's Religious Aspects: Soyinka, in his literary works, he reveals that in human history, religion is the main responsible of human sufferings and violence. On the contrast, he tried to show the world that the Yoruba religious tradition is a possible solution to this human sufferings and violence. He believes that philosophically, the Orisa, who practice Yoruba are more tolerant than other believers (theist). In his famous essay book, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, the following paragraph reflects the tolerant nature of the Orisa:

"Religion, or profession of faith, cannot serve as the common ground for human coexistence except of course by the adoption of enforcement as a principle and, thus, the manifestation of its corollary—hypocrisy—an outward conformism that is dictated by fear, by a desire for preferment, or indeed, the

need for physical survival. In the end, the product is conflict, and the destruction of cultures.The essence of Orisa is the antithesis of tyranny, bigotry, and dictatorship—what greater gift than this respect, this spirit of accommodation, can humanity demand from the world of the spirit?" Moreover, in his famous book, *Of Africa*, Soyinka boldly depicts that "Go to the Orisa, learn from the Orisa, and be wise" (Soyinka, *Of Africa*, p134-5).

According to Ifa's doctrine the truth is such kind of target that is ultimately followed by humanity. In Yoruba and Orisa religion, God is not an absolute power. God accomplishes his task and job through human beings. In Yoruba mind, God is not absolute true. Rather half true. Half is the human being, we can say. Soyinka, In his autobiography, *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years - A Memoir 1946-65*, he expresses his thoughts, to emphasis and focus the absolutism of truth (existence of God), such as "half-truth," "doctored truth," "selective truth," "annotated truth." Furthermore, the Yoruba society believes that man returns to the earth again after his death and finishes God's job. It means God and human being both have the supremacy to govern the earth. According to the Orisa religion, God is not the last word. It emphasizes on human knowledge.

Like the other contemporary humanists, he treated absolutism of religion, fanatic ideology and intolerance are, of course, totally, a big threat to cultural progress, democratic thoughts and advancement and freedom of human beings. He thinks religious fanaticism is a great challenge for the human survival and his security. In *Climate of Fear*, He expresses that "We have to speak to religion!" (Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, p120) It means, we, the people of this civilized and scientifically advanced modern society must confront fanaticism and radicalism as warriors. In the same book, he utters, "We are obliged to recognize, indeed, to emphasize, the place of injustice, localized or global, as ready manure for the deadly shoots of fanaticism. However, the engines of global violence today are oiled from the deep wells of fanaticism, even though they may be cranked by the calculating hands of politicians or the power-hungry" (Ibid).

The interference of Islam and Christianity hampered the indigenous African people who loved to be wild in nature. Both the religions failed to stop slave business from Africa to the other part of the world. Even they (the two religions) never tried. On the other hand, it took centuries to convert them in their own religious ideology. Although these black indigenous people adapted their beliefs with Islam and Christianity, they didn't, even till now, fully forget their Yoruba concept. However, this religious adaption was taken place, because the people of Africa are not conservative, rather, to some extent, they are fully tolerant in nature.

.....Africans have had centuries to develop unique adaptations to Christian and Islamic practices, and theologies to make them well suited to African needs. It also means that in many respects neither to be considered particularly foreign to Africa; in some cases, their African forms are older than certain "traditional religions." In fact, all religions are always changing and incorporate new aspects into their practices (Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, p89). To him, Yoruba society is full of individuals who worship the Anglican God on Sundays:

"Sacrifice to Sango every feast day, consult *Ifa* before any new project and dance with the Cherubim and Seraphim every evening...No spiritual conflict is created within them and no guilt is experienced. Being un westernized in religious attitudes, that is, not slavishly tried to the western concept of a single form of worship for the attainment of spiritual exaltation or divine protection, they live without any internal contradictions" (Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, p302).

His life and literary works: Wole Soyinka is the first playwright and poet who presented the Nigerian, in other word, Sub-Saharan literature before the whole world, especially before the English readers by writing in English and by winning the Nobel Award in 1986. He depicted the old tradition of exploration of the poor, uneducated, indigenous, black African people with his literary works and philosophical thoughts. He was sentenced to the jail during the

Civil war in 1960. After the civil war, in 1967, six years of independence, Wole Soyinka famously declared that a "Phase of Disillusionment" had started. Most contemporary African writers started to pay attention to the problems they faced at home. A new vision and mission was needed for the post colonial thinkers, writers and politicians, as he was a political activist. Soyinka said: "if writers were to have any influence in postcolonial African societies, in which the state seemed to provide no recourse against corruption and rising violence" (Attwell, David, 2003, p32).

Soyinka was born in Abeokuta on July, 1934. He was educated in Ibadan University in Nigeria and Leeds University in England. In Leeds University, he studied English Literature. In 1957 he was appointed as a reader of London Royal Court Theater. Here he studied about drama and theater of England, America and Europe. This study helped him to be remarkable playwright. He was inspired by the British playwright Shakespeare and his famous play "The Playboy of the Western world". While working in the London Royal Theater, he wrote two One-Act plays: "The Invention" and "The Swamp Dwellers". Although some critics argued that these two plays failed to attract the audiences of London, "The Swamp Dwellers" was considered a masterpiece by some contemporary British critics.

Soyinka's plays are admixture of past and present of Nigeria. These are not traditional but simple. He emphasized Saharan music, folk songs and pastoral elements, at the same time, he expresses his modern thoughts of the contemporary world and post colonial human ideology in his plays. The Swedish committee declared, "Because in a wide cultured perspective with poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence." As a critic, Soyinka criticizes some of his contemporary writers who were benefited from the rulers. He explains a famous African proverb, "A tiger does not proclaim his tigrity, he pounces. In other words, a tiger does not stand in the forest and say, "I am tiger". When you pass where the tiger has walked before, you see skeletons of a duiker [antelope], you know some tigrity has been emanated there." It means human being will be reflected by his achievement and abilities. He also advised, "not to blow your own

trumpet, except during an interview. Even at an interview, you must blow your trumpet in such a way that what it produces is nice to hear, rather than noise to the ear. If you are gorgeous or good or great, people will know. If you have to proclaim your 'tigrity', then you are not a true tiger, you are a toy tiger. Don't be a phoney. Be authentic" (*A History of Neo-African Literature*, 1968, London, Faber, p265-6)! He had explained a concept of criticism about Negritude, at a conference in Kampala, in 1962.

Soyinka also acted in a film. The name of the film was *Kongi's Harvest*, which was directed by Ossie Davis, in 1970. The story was based on Soyinka's play *Kongi Harvest*, the same name. It was the first production by a "Nigerian indigenous company whose aim was to change perceptions about the country and the African continent" (Bolwell, Edwin, "Tarzan's Africa may be up a tree; U.S.-Nigerian Film Company Would Change Image", July 1967, New York, *The New York Times*).

In the film, President Kongi (Wole Soyinka), who is the dictator of a developing Sub-Saharan nation, is trying to modernize his nation after deposing King Oba Danlola (Rasidi Onikoyi). The tribal people deny the unification ideology of the president Kongi. On the contrary, Kongi tries to implement all his ways to establish his state policies and goal (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MainPage>).

In 1962 he joined the Ibadan University as a lecturer in English. But in 1963, he resigned from the post due to political reason. In this period he wrote famous play and novel: *The Road and The Interpreters*. In 1965 he was arrested again on the charge of keeping connection with the secret political conspiracy against the military government. In the jail he wrote a lot of poems, articles and books against the corruption misrule of the country during the civil war. During this time he wrote, *The Mandate Prison Notes*, "About jail experiences he wrote *Shuttle in Crypt*."

Conclusion

Considering all the above mentioned discussion, we can realize that Wole Soyinka's poetic diction, prose, dramas and plays, reflects the voice

of silent, indigenous, tribal, Sub-Saharan black people. His democratic sensibility, strong feelings of humanism, post-colonial philosophy of life, thoughts, ideas and vehement combat against the tyranny of the contemporary rulers of Nigeria made him unique among the other literary figures. His consciousness of local culture and political strategies regarding both literature and activities of life haven't made him only an African representative. Rather his Africanism has become the reflection of Internationalism.

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