

Studying the Land in Wole Soyinka's "The Jero Plays"

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Abstract— *The article looks at two play-texts (more commonly called, "The Jero Plays") by the Nigerian literary figure, Wole Soyinka from a certain angle. It draws this angle from the theoretical framework of ecocriticism, or ecological literary criticism. Through this kind of a reading, issues of the local natural environment, the position of the land and its connection with the human inhabitants in the chosen texts are raised. The literary figure's concern about the environment and his eco-sensitivity is also noticed by this exercise.*

Keywords— *African Literature, ecocriticism, ecology, land, literature, Soyinka*

I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Nigerian literary figure, Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) has been heavily influenced by his indigenous Yoruba traditions, and includes that in a great way in his works. The influence of these traditions automatically makes the artist sensitive about the natural environment, the natural cycles and the non-human forms of life. Overall, it makes the Yoruban artist aware that beyond the more tangible realm of human beings and the earth (the "Aye"), lies a supernatural world full of powerful spiritual entities (the "Orun"). Human and non-human beings of the earth are also domains where powerful spirits reside. Indigenous rituals become extremely important in the daily lived experience of the characters in Soyinka's works. When ecological themes are foreground in Soyinka's plays, it is found that Soyinka emphasises on the fact that if the environment (including the spiritual forces in there) is not preserved or protected, it would soon be the end of humankind as well. Coexistence and reconciliation between these entities are of utmost importance. Farming occupies a central space in Yorubaland and its belief system. According to J. S. Eades:

... It is impossible to isolate completely the 'rural' from the 'urban' or the 'agricultural' from the 'non-agricultural' sectors of the economy among the Yoruba. The settlement pattern and the relationship between the towns and the farm villages mean that many farmers see

themselves as town residents, and many have dual occupations. (Eades, 65)

Keeping other occupations (fishing, trading, crafts and so on) aside, it seems that farming impacts the flow of the Yoruban lives the most. Just as a good harvest of crops (yam, cocoa, palm oil and so on) would predict a happy future the reverse situation, that is failure of crops would mean a forthcoming catastrophe in their lives. Crops like palm (wine) and yam appear prominently in Soyinka's texts depicting the Yoruba life.

II. THE APPROACH

When one studies the land in any literary text, one has to first unpack the layered meaning of the word. The land includes the landscape, the geographic space that is depicted in the world of the text. One also needs to look at the position of the natural elements, the flora and fauna in the concerned landscape, depicted by the author. The human characters of the text are also part of the landscape, and it is equally important to observe their actions towards the natural environment. The field of literary studies that has been employed in looking at the chosen texts in this article is ecocriticism, or ecological literary criticism. Ecocriticism (first coined in c.1978, by William Rueckert) is the shorter or more popular name for ecological literary criticism. Ecocriticism as a discipline and as a method brings together the sciences and the humanities, the physical and the spiritual, to analyze the environment, plus find out ways in which the contemporary environmental situation could be addressed and improved. It focuses on the relationship between literature and the environment – how the relationship between human beings and their physical environment is reflected in literature. It urges human beings to realize that they should change their own ways of life and thinking, and take necessary actions for the prevention of ecological degradation and promote protection of the environment, in the contemporary times. In ecocriticism, ecology and ecological concepts are applied to the study of literature. Nature often poses as an entity where one can look to find solutions to one's problems – a repository

of values. Since human culture has produced the crisis that we are in, the study of human cultural production may provide a guide to understand how to find a solution. A text could be seen both as a part of the environment and as an independent ecological system. An ecocritical reading of a given text comes with a host of interesting questions that arise from certain ecologically-themed strands. One needs to see if the non-human elements are an integral part of it with a significant presence, not just a prop – thereby representing the interconnectedness of all that has been created by nature. One needs to see in the text how far has human interest been given preference, and that whether human beings are accountable for their (both positive and negative) actions towards nature. Also, whether the environment is presented as a static or a dynamic process, in the text. Whether the texts demonstrate in any way, that the characters' individual identities are shaped up by their space/physical environment. Whether there is a possible placing of events/characters described in the texts, against the then historical scenario/movements; Whether there are voices in the texts which alert the reader/audience about the ongoing ecological degradation of the environment, along with the consequent threat to the identities of the characters; Whether there has been a call for doing something to preserve that space and identity, and a suggestion of possible ways of doing so. Then again, how far has the human community/ecosystem maintained a harmonious and balanced eco-human relationship? The discipline of ecocriticism is a newly emerging one. It has fluidity because the ecocritics still need to clearly define its scope and aims and work on stably concluded assumptions, set of principles or techniques.

III. DISCUSSION OF THE TEXTS

The “Jero plays” are two play-texts composed by Soyinka, which focus on a cunning and corrupt self-proclaimed prophet called Brother Jeroboam. On reading these plays: *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960) and *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973) ecocritically, three main ideas could be noticed. Firstly, how natural elements have been painted in the light of divinity in the texts. Secondly, the land-politics of that particular space where the texts are set. Thirdly, the exploration of human nature – especially through Jero's misogynistic attitude, and his desire to take advantage of the common folk and control their minds. Overall, the texts show the journey of this man of God/Christian prophet/“Beach Divine”, Jero and how in the contemporary times, religion has become a commodity and the so-called holy men have become materialistic, worldly and the least spiritual or religious-minded. Viewing the sea as a supernatural and a divine element, the beach becomes the ideal place for serving

God peacefully and in isolation:

The beach. A few stakes and palm leaves denote the territory of Brother Jeroboam's church. To one side is a palm tree, and in the centre is a heap of sand with assorted empty bottles, a small mirror, and hanging from one of the bottles is a rosary and cross. [*The Trials of Brother Jero* (Soyinka, 152)]

There are instances in *The Trials of Brother Jero*, where the sea water is considered holy and having healing or cleansing properties:

Brother Jero, as the singing starts, hands two empty bottles to Chume [Jero's assistant, whom he calls “brother”] who goes to fill them with water from the sea. (Soyinka, 158)

Again,

Jero hesitates, then hands over his rod to Chume and goes after them... (Soyinka, 159)

Also,

As Jeroboam is not forthcoming, he [Chume] begins, very uncertainly, to sprinkle some of the water on the penitent [a woman who was behaving violently], crossing her on the forehead. (Ibid)

There are instances in *Jero's Metamorphosis* which hints at a grim situation. Sometimes, the false men of god could kill people they dislike or have trouble with and throw them into the sea, claiming that the sea had punished the latter:

Ananias [a shady boxer-turned-prophet]: ... Brother, depend on my vote any time. (Getting warmer.) And if there's anyone you'd prefer to take a walk outside on his head for making trouble ...

Jero: I don't need your violence... (Soyinka, 181)

Also,

Caleb [another shady beach prophet]: ... Rally the union. No business sharks in our spirituous waters. (Soyinka, 200)

Now comes the second idea – the land-politics in the particular beach where the texts are set. It has already been mentioned that religion (which includes the practice of divine guidance to people) has become a commercialized profession for the prophets of that beach – where most of the prophets are of criminal and shady backgrounds. It so happens (in *The Trials of Brother Jero*) that the town council have become aware of this, have divided the land among the prophets and have come to intervene in the ongoing squabble for land among the latter:

Yes, it did come to the point where it became necessary for the Town Council to come to the beach and settle the Prophets' territorial warfare once and for all. (Soyinka, 149)

It is also here in *The Trials of Brother Jero*, that Jero lets the readers/audience know how he betrayed his mentor.

When his mentor trusted him with the paperwork of the land for their church, he occupied it in his own name, rendering his mentor landless:

My Master, the same one who brought me up in prophetic ways staked his claim and won a grant of land. ... I helped him, with a campaign led by six dancing girls from the French territory, all dressed as Jehovah's Witnesses. What my old master did not realize was that I was really helping myself. (Soyinka, 145)

The mentor then lashes out at him with curses:

Old Prophet: Ungrateful wretch! Is this how you repay the long years of training I have given you? To drive me, your old tutor, off my piece of land ... telling me I have lived beyond my time. Ha! May you be rewarded in the same manner. May the Wheel come right round and find you just as helpless as you make me now. ... (Soyinka, 146)

In *Jero's Metamorphosis*, it is clear to the readers/audience that the government has decided to get rid of all the churches on the beach. The beach would be reconstructed as a tourist spot, and an amphitheatre would be built for public execution for added attraction:

Executive: They have to be evicted. They stand in the way of progress. They clutter up the beach and prevent decent men from coming here and paying to enjoy themselves. They are holding up a big tourist business. You know yourself how the land value has doubled since we started public executions on the beach. (Soyinka, 185)
Then again in the meeting of the prophets, organized by Jero to protest against the government decision:

Isaac [another shady prophet]: 'Unfortunately the beach is at present cluttered up with riff-raff of all sorts who dupe the citizenry and make the beach unattractive to decent and respectable people. Chiefest among these are the so-called ...'

...

Jero (taking back the file): ... '... the so-called prophets and evangelists. All these are not only to be immediately expelled but steps must be taken to ensure that they never at any time find their way back to the execution stadium.' (Soyinka, 201-202)

Also pointed out by Ananias at another point:

Ananias: ... the City Council have taken a final decision. They're going to chuck us out. Every last hypocritical son of the devil. (Soyinka, 179. Note how self-aware the character of Ananias is of his and his fellow prophets' hypocrisy and shady backgrounds)

There is also the mentioning of a water-crisis in the area by Amope, the wife of Chume whom Jero owes money, in *The Trials of Brother Jero*. At a point in the text, Amope tells Chume, "Careful ... careful now ... the cork nearly came off that bottle. You know how difficult it is get any clean water in this place..." (Soyinka, 148)

Now we come to the last point of discussion, with regards to the two Jero texts. Here we look at how Jero places women in a position beneath men, and treats them disrespectfully – even after being a so-called man of God. He is just one of the men who does that in the area where the texts are set. In *The Trials of Brother Jero*, he tells us of "some prophets I could name [who] gained their present beaches by getting women penitents to shake their bosoms in spiritual ecstasy." (Soyinka, 145) As mentioned earlier, in the same text, he owes money to Amope and views her with disdain. He even escapes from another side, whenever he sees her:

Jero: ... How does one maintain his dignity when the daughter of Eve forces him to leave his own house through a window? God curse that woman! I never thought she would dare affront the presence of a man of God. One pound eight for this little cape. It is sheer robbery. (Soyinka, 153)

At a point soon after, it so happens that a young girl passes him by, wearing wrappers for her swim. Unlike that of a prophet, the readers/audience see Jero expressing a materialistic and earthly desire for that girl:

(The young girl crosses the stage again. She has just had her swim and the difference is remarkable. Clean, wet, shiny face and hair. She continues to wipe herself with her wrapper as she walks.)

Jero (following her all the way with his eyes.): Every morning, every day I witness this divine transformation, O Lord... (Soyinka, 153-154)

In the same text, when Jero gets to know that Amope is Chume's wife (whom Jero hates), he permits the latter to beat her, even if he forbade him to do so for quite some time, earlier:

Jero: ... After all, Christ himself was not averse to using the whip when occasion demanded it.

... Brother Chume, your wife seems such a wicked, wilful sinner... (Soyinka, 162)

However, Chume manages to sniff out Jero's cunning:

Chume: ... Suddenly he decides I may beat my wife, eh? For his own convenience. At his own convenience. (Soyinka, 167)

In *Jero's Metamorphosis* the readers/audience find Jero enjoying the company of his beautiful assistant, Sister Rebecca:

A demure young woman, quite attractive, is seated at a table taking the dictation [by Jero]. (Soyinka, 175)

Then again,

Once outdoors Brother Jero slips round the side and observes her [Rebecca] through the window. The woman's condition obviously uplifts him for he moves off with even jauntier step and a light adjustment to his chasuble... (Soyinka, 178)

Rebecca expresses her blind devotion to Jero when she utters statements like, “Not if you don’t think it, Brother Jeroboam,” and “Whatever you say, Brother Jeroboam.” (Soyinka, 175)

Jero also wishes to use his position of religious power to control minds of the general public. In *The Trials of Brother Jero*, He blatantly lets the readers/audience know that he treats those who come to him for guidance as customers and he cares about money a lot, giving them an idea of how treacherous he could be:

Jero: ... I am glad I got here before any customers—I mean worshippers... I know they are dissatisfied because I keep them dissatisfied. Once they are full, they won’t come again. (Soyinka, 153)

In *Jero’s Metamorphosis*, Jero confronts Chume knowing fully well that Chume would be mighty angry with him. He had conspired against Chume in *The Trials of Brother Jero* and had sent the latter to a mental asylum. However, due to his convincing power, Jero manages to turn Chume’s brain around by making Chume doubt his present position at the band:

Jero: But look round you, Brother Chume, look around you. You want to make this world a better place? Good! But to get hanged in the process? And perhaps in public? For whom? For the sake of people like Major Silva? People who don’t even understand the musical soul which the Lord has given you? Are they worth it, Brother Chume? Oh I was watching you for some time you know—that man is an enemy believe me... He does not understand you. I am sure they are all like that. (Soyinka, 193)

It is through his developed shrewdness and gift of the gab, that Jero becomes a ruthless politician in *Jero’s Metamorphosis*. He finds a way through blackmailing the other shady prophets and the Tourism executive, to head a church and earn a permanent income. In the meeting of prophets, he lets the others know of his plans, displaying an aura of sly superiority:

Jero: ... ‘It is proposed however, that since the purpose of public execution is for the moral edification and spiritual upliftment of the people, one respectable religious denomination be licensed to operate on the Bar Beach. Such a body will say prayers before and after each execution, and where appropriate will administer the last rites to the condemned. They will be provided a point of vantage where they will preach to the public on evil of crime and the morals to be drawn from the miserable end of the felons. After which their brass band [the Salvation Army] shall provide religious music.’ (Soyinka, 202)

IV. CONCLUSION

Wole Soyinka not only delves into his traditional Yoruba community knowledge, trying to highlight its relevance in

the contemporary times, but also makes his reader/audience realize what an important position the natural world holds in it. Bearing his indigenous community knowledge, Soyinka expresses ecological concerns and the awareness/presence of natural processes in all of his plays in layered ways. To him, the supernatural world is but an extension of the ecology of this world. He spreads the awareness to the fractured, selfish human community of today, of how colonization has exploited/transformed huge landscapes. He also expresses the relevance of natural elements and non-human life in the contemporary world. Literature is a tool with which he carries on his environmental activism.

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