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The Voice of Suppressed: A Study of Selected Plays of Wole Soyinka

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Abstract – For the most people, change is something that is achieved through agreement. Most people can basically say that they all are living in freedom and with some kind of liberty. Then, imagine that suddenly an outsider comes in to the home and starts imposing rules and making changes that all have to obey, or risk severe punishment for disobeying. After a period of time, the family cannot handle it anymore, decides to finally tell the unwanted guest to get out of the house. When he is gone they realize that he has destroyed a lot and try to go back to their original rules but don't know where to start. The world and family has changed so much that returning to the past way of thinking will not work anymore (Scattergood, 3)

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INTRODUCTION

Something similar to this situation happened in Africa during colonization. The colonial powers like the Dutch, the British, the French, and Belgians came to Africa and established new governments that claimed to be democratic and out in place new rules (Scattergood, 3). Many African countries were led by kings, as well as nobles that represented different parts of the country and which balanced the power of kings. The colonists felt that there was a need to reorganize African government by introducing democratic governments where colonists could control the governments. Before colonization, Africans lived in a monarchical government where people were represented by the nobles, not a true democracy but people had a say in the government “viable political institutions with checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power existed in Africa before the colonialists set foot on the continent” (Ayittey, 63). The African government was more than able to rule effectively. (Scattergood, 3)

Many African presidents seem to use the idea that democracy was unfamiliar to Africa. “Democracy is not for Africa. There was only one African chief and here in Zaire we must make unity” (Ayittey, 65). Mobutu was the Second President of Congo who used this justification to his dictatorship (Scattergood, 4). Colonialism led to corruption across Africa. This corruption led to poverty. This trend is particularly clear in the example Nigeria.

ADVERSE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM

During colonization, many African countries were divided to in territories that were controlled by different

European countries. The division of Africa was agreed upon at the Berlin Conferences where different parts of Africa were allocated to different European countries (scattergood, 4). “The European nations divided the continent with little thought about how African ethnic or linguistic groups were distributed. No African ruler was invited to attend these meetings, yet the conference sealed Africa’s fate” (The Age of Imperialism). This separation of African nations made many Africans who used to share the same rules; familial clans and ways of living, lose their connection to each other and follow new allegiances and national interests. In the case of Nigeria, before the British could take control over the whole colony, they had to negotiate with the Germans who were competing for rights to have north Nigeria for raw materials. The British succeed in getting most of Nigeria as a colony. “In 1947, a federal system of government was established under a new Nigerian constitution introduced by the United Kingdom. This system was based on three regions: Eastern, Western and Northern” (Nigeria). The south of Nigeria was politically isolated from the other parts of the country since the south had not changed its constitution.

Colonial rule brought negative impacts into the existing religions through the introduction of new religion Christianity. Yoruba, traditional religion and Muslim felt threatened (Ogunbado, 54). Today Africa has the higher percentage of Christians than it had before or even during colonization (Scattergood, 5). Missionaries were converting many Yoruba people and Muslims into the new religion, while these actions caused havoc among the followers of the same religion. The Colonialists and Missionaries worked together to subdue the existing religions (Ogunbado,

54). Colonizers in fact forced to accept the Christian religion. The colonizers thought that Africans had no legitimate religion but that their beliefs were based on fear and faith in magic or luck (Scattergood, 5). By bringing Christianity to Africa, Colonizers brought confusion to the society of the colonized (Scattergood, 5). The religious leaders in Africa had the important role uniting the people by telling them what the gods want them to do or what rituals to practice when a child falls sick. When the people of Africa were exposed to new beliefs and the missionaries overshadowed their religious leadership, Africans became confused, many chose the new faith Christianity to alleviate this confusion (Scattergood, 5). However in some African countries Christianity was imposed on African.

Colonialism and Christianity brought in western education and civilization. This civilization proved the negative effect in the sense that an instrument of conversation, that is, to convert the beneficiaries in to Christianity (Ogunbado, 54). It seems that western education and its religion were focused on African spiritual and some aspect of social life (Omotosho, 1998 and Ogunbado, 2011).

In 19th century, the slave trade also prevailed in Africa. Colonizers were exporting perhaps between 70,000 and 80,000 slaves annually in different countries (Oliver, 20). It is also claimed that slave trade helped to spread the Yoruba traditional religion beyond the locality and boosted the economy. It is argued that those slaves who were taken to the foreign land were forcibly transported so as to work on their master's farm (Ogunbado, 55). They were not even allowed to practice their religion and were converted to Christianity. Only few of them remained in their religion and were able to practice it after their freedom. Most of them even died on the way and were thrown into the ocean (Ogunbado, 55). Apart from that, the departure of the slaves from their home was disastrous to their family and community because they were the pillars and able bodies (working force) in their community.

The division of land, separation of races and religion all changed African thinking and ideologies (Scattergood, 6). During this period, corruption also prevailed among the colonizers. Corruption can and often does led to poverty. A corrupted government may have the ability to enrich itself and forget about the people. "African countries during the last several decades have failed to improve civil service efficiency and particular in wealth creation has not made the bureaucracy more responsive to the needs of private sector." (Mukum, 90). Poverty was rampant in Africa, partially because wealthy members of government have not yet had the motivation to address the roots of the poverty. Corruption is often argued to be the root of poverty because many of the governments in Africa are corrupted and the leaders of most of them use the countries resources for their own purpose or enrichment. "Corruption in Nigeria has an adverse effect on social and economic development and also in

building a nation" (Corruption Eradication in Nigeria: An Appraisal). The social class inequalities in African societies are huge. African governments do not support capitalist economic systems where people can start their own business and be able to move from a lower class to a higher class. These rigid social class differences increase poverty in African countries. Not all Africans are poor and many use their connections or relations with government to stay rich. Nigeria for example has a high poverty rate despite its significant economic growth (Mukum 87-108).

Colonialism is an issue that will never be forgotten in Africa at large and south-west of the country in particular due to its impacts that lingered after its disappearance. It is defined as exploitation by a stronger country of a weaker one or the use of the weaker country's resources to strengthen and enrich the stronger country (Ogunbado, 56). It came to limelight due to the abolition of slave trade, emergency of industrial revolution and the search for new market for the manufactured goods and so on. The impacts of this phenomenon are manifested in many aspect of colonized people's life (Ogunbado, 56). Africa had suffered from the colonial rulers which came in through the missionaries' path, yet it has make up of development that was set up then in view of the contemporary missionaries to strive for excellence as they missionize the nation with integrity, adequate information of the people and their culture and indifference and discrimination over colour, tribe, language and ethnic differences (Olatunde, 11).

Thus, during colonial period, African people were exploited and suppressed by colonizer in different ways. They were suppressed by slavery, missionaries, colonial rules, corruption and poverty. Thus, one can say that Africa was suppressed.

During the Colonial period of 19th century, many writers flourished in Africa, for example, Chinua Achebe, J. P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, John Munonye, Michael Echeruo, Abiola Irele and Wole Soyinka. Akinwande Oluwale Soyinka is one of the "three big men" of the African world of letters, among who include fellow Eastern Nigerian giant 'Chinua Achebe' and Kenyan activist writer 'James Ngugi Wa Thiongo (Sudhakar, 58). His works had always been bigger and wider than any of them. Soyinka's writing talents alone are at least sevenfold: Playwright, Poet, Novelist, Autobiographer, Critic, Translator and Editor (Sudhakar, 58) To these vocations might be added an equal number of extra literary talents: Actor and Director on Stage and in film, Theatre Manager, Academic and Political Activist, Recording Artist and Dress Designer, to name but a few. It was primarily as a dramatist and man-of-the-theatre, however that Wole Soyinka won international fame (Sudhakar, 58). He has fused the past and the present as the western dramatic technique of the recent past in his plays. That has influenced him during his formative years in England. Soyinka has drawn on the past of Africa to

highlight the contemporary social, political and economic affairs of Nigeria after attaining independence (Sudhakar, 58). He escapes from the confines of Nigerian art and culture by reworking on the legends and myths as signifying universal experience. He displays an obsession with myth and rituals. Soyinka has deeply imbibed and assimilated the Yoruba rituals in his writings, which give us a picture of the post-colonial regimes in West Africa (Sudhakar, 58).

Akinwande Olewole Babatunde Soyinka was born on 13th July 1934, in a town Ijebu Isara, close to Abeokuta in Western Nigeria (Gadomski, 1). Soyinka is second of six children of Samuel Ayodele Soyinka and Grace Eniola Soyinka (Gadomski, 1). His father, Samuel Ayodele Soyinka whom he called "S.A." or "Essay" (Wikipedia, 2), was an Anglican minister (Wikipedia, 2), and the head master of St. Peter School in Abeokuta (Gadomski, 1). His mother, Grace Eniola Soyinka, was a Christian whom he dubbed as "Wild Christian" (Wikipedia, 2). She came from one of the most distinguished Anglican families in western Nigeria (Gikandi, 11). She owned a shop in the nearby market and was respected as a political activist in with the women's movement in the local community (Gadomski, 1) (Wikipedia, 2). His maternal grandfather was a minister in the local Anglican Church and his uncle was the principal of Abeokuta Grammar School (Gikandi, 11). Christianity and its belief systems may not be a marked feature of Soyinka's drama except perhaps as a subject of satire in his metaphysical plays, but it was a central element in his early life and education (Gikandi, 11). As a little boy, Soyinka has had contact with the traditional Yoruba beliefs and Christianity as well, and this atmosphere of religious syncretism, have had a great influence on his yet forming personality (Gadomski, 1). It is not an exaggeration to say that Soyinka came from one of the most religious and Westernized families in colonial Nigeria. On the other hand, Soyinka's paternal grandfather led a life that was guided by ancient Yoruba belief and practices, and it was through extended visits to this side of his family that Soyinka was exposed to the rituals and cosmologies of his people. At a time when members of the African elite were ashamed of their African traditions, Soyinka was keen to learn more about Yoruba religious rituals and systems of thought into his plays (Gikandi, 11).

In 1939, when Soyinka was barely a five years young boy, the World War II broke out. At home of Soyinka's family, chiefly thanks to his father, at that time there was electricity and radio, so, the child Wole listened with curiosity the news from bursting in war flames European continent, at that time almost completely dominated by the person of Adolf Hitler. Hitler very soon became for Wole an embodiment of all evil force and incarnation of devil himself (Gadomski, 1).

I. Problem to be investigated

The researcher has critically analyzed the selected plays of Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and The Jewel*, *The Strong Breed*, and *Death and the King's Horseman*. Throughout this project, researcher has researched about the voice of suppressed of African people, their Yoruba culture and their tribal customs and tradition. In African dilemma, poverty, ignorance, conflict between black and white, conflict between Western culture and Yoruba culture, corruption in the local government and problem emerging out of it, division among the tribes and how it delays the progress of African in *The Lion and The Jewel*, *The Strong Breed*, and *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka.

II. Origin of the research problem

Wole Soyinka is a Nigerian writer, poet and playwright, Noble Prize winner in the 1986. Wole Soyinka is well known playwright but less explored. Black writing has come to the fore because of the expression of their tales of exploration till now marginalized section of the society has suddenly found its voice. Wole Soyinka is one such playwright whose plays express wove of the suffering of the black community and expresses the suffering of the black community.

III. Its interdisciplinary relevance

The researcher has critically analyzed Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and The Jewel*, *The Strong Breed*, and *Death and the King's Horseman* with reference to reveal the condition of the African people. African had been suffering under the colonial rule for more than decades and it has not freed itself totally from the influence of influences of colonialism. The challenge before African nationalism was to cope with the complications of colonial legacy handed down to them. They were in search of a new direction and order as they triumphed over colonial powers. They were against the policies of the colonialists to apply their norms on the African society. The colonialists heavily exploited most of African countries. The people of Africa had to live under the rules imposed by the white masters. The traditional value and structure of the African society was shaken with the arrival of the colonial powers into African continent.

IV. Objectivity of the project

1. To study the voice of suppressed in Wole Soyinka's selected plays, *The Lion and the jewel*, *The Strong Breed*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphosis*
2. To present brief overview of African tradition, custom and culture.

3. To study *The Lion and the Jewel* to bring out conflict between Western and African tradition customs.
4. To study *The Strong Breed and Death* and the *King's Horseman* to bring out how tribal customs and tradition deeply rooted in their psyche that they take human sacrifice in a very light manner. They do not consider it improper or uneven.
5. To study *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphosis*, satirize Christianity and religious hypocrisy, particularly, the unquestioning devotion that many converts display towards their spiritual leaders, often exposing themselves to manipulation in the process.

V. Hypothesis or Research Questions

The Lion and the Jewel, *The Strong Breed*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphosis* show the social, political condition prevailing during the colonial ruled and its effect on the people. Wole Soyinka had dealt with almost all the merits and demerits of the African life. In his works, he presents the picture of African tradition and its culture and express suffering of the black community. He does not make any attempt to hide or ignore or over highlight any demerit of the African life. At the same time, he does not become a victim of inferiority complex or indulge in to any biased thinking against his own continent. He remains faithful and aesthetic in his plays. It is in this sense his plays become 'the plays of African suffering'.

VI. Research design and methodology

This research is based on hypothesis and analyzed for the purpose extensive source, shall be used extensively. The researcher has first read the primary sources extensively and then has analyzed systematically in given chapters. The scheme of the cauterizations are as following.

VII. Tools to be used in the collection of the data

Library

E – Library

Internet

VIII. Significance of the study

This study enables researcher to know more about the African people and their culture specially, Yoruba culture and its customs, traditional belief. It also gives the knowledge of the past and present condition of the African society and its conditions.

The present study is important because no one so far has taken any research project or even written an article on this subject. Therefore this research project is unique in its nature and will prove to be useful for research scholars in future. The researcher aimed that systematically and scientifically study of the voice of suppressed in Wole Soyinka's selected plays, *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Strong Breed and Death* and *the King's Horse man*. *The Trial of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphosis*

The researcher hopes that the present study will turn out to be very useful one.

IX. Its relevance to the present day problem and need of the society and the country

Yes, all the three play present the real picture of present day's problem. It shows the tradition, rituals, illiteracy, unemployment, extra marital affairs etc. All the three plays show the conflict between upper and lower class people, Western and Yoruba tradition, tradition vs. modernity, black and white.

X. It's likely contribution to knowledge

This study has potential to become very sensible to project work highlighting contemporary issue of African community and their customs and tradition.

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